



“With almost clean or at most slightly dirty hands”. On the self-denazification of German geography after 1945 and its rebranding as a science of peace



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 February 2015

Received in revised form

23 September 2016

Accepted 27 September 2016

Keywords:

World war 2

National socialism

Denazification

Germany

Carl Troll

ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s there is an overall agreement that German academic and applied geography between 1933 and 1945 were closely linked to the ideology and practice of National Socialism. There is very little historical work, however, on how geography was reestablished in Germany after the end of National Socialism. This paper deals with West German geography after 1945 and the attempts to reestablish geography as a legitimate discipline within academia. Taking the influential paper by German geographer Carl Troll as a starting point, this paper deals, on the one hand, with the way geographers positioned geography in relation to National Socialism, and how they told the history of their recent past. It then asks what the defeat of Germany and the experiences of the war in general meant for how geographers in Germany thought about the relation between the discipline and politics. It is argued that a number of cleansing and legitimating strategies that freed geography from direct involvement with National Socialism, went hand in hand with a very quick adaption to the new world order and a rebranding of geography as a science of peace.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s there is an overall agreement about the ways that German academic and applied geography between 1933 and 1945 were closely linked to the ideology and practice of National Socialism. Major protagonists of the discipline were dedicated Nazis before 1933; after defeat in World War I there was a wide range of revanchist as well as forms of anti-modernist thinking within geography, making it one of the most conservative disciplines in German academia. Compared to other disciplines the number of people who for political reasons were victimized or forced to leave the country was relatively small and at the same time geography was overrepresented in the 1933 “Commitment of the German Professors for Adolf Hitler”. Geographers often supported or assisted Nazi ideology and the war, be it in their academic or public writing or in the more practical form of planning the spatial reorganization of the occupied countries such as Walter Christaller and his involvement in *Generalplan Ost*. This has been well-documented (Barnes & Minca, 2013; Barnes, 2015; Fahlbusch,

Rössler, & Siegrist, 1989; Rössler, 1989, 1990). However, what has received relatively little attention in the history of geography so far is the immediate postwar period, and the turn from a discipline under National Socialism to one in a liberal capitalist democracy during the Cold War. There surely is an overall acceptance that for most geographers – as for most others in academia and administration – there was a continuity of employment as well as of the ways they thought about geography. Only a few geographers in the Eastern as well as the Western occupation zones lost their jobs due to their involvement in the war or the regime. Then most of them, after a short employment ban, returned to universities or other public research institutions. Geography in Germany, it is commonly assumed, had no major problems in reconnecting to the pre-1933 geography (Böhm, 2008; Fahlbusch et al., 1989).

There is very little historical work on how geography was reestablished in Germany after the war, after the end of National Socialism. This paper deals with West German geography after 1945 and the attempts to reestablish geography as a legitimate discipline within academia. The focus here is not on the institutional reorganization of geography at universities or in new associations (Sandner, 1995; Schelhaas, 2004; Wardenga, Henniges, Brogiato, & Schelhaas, 2011). Instead the paper deals, on the one

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hand, with the way geographers positioned geography in relation to National Socialism, and how they told the history of their recent past. While most of the critical literature on geography and National Socialism was written by younger authors some decades after the war here the focus is on the immediate post-war time. On the other hand, this paper is interested in how the political and social dimension of geographical knowledge was reframed in the wake of an externally enforced democratization and denazification. While much of the main paradigm of *Länderkunde* remained intact and reconnected to the geography before 1933 the political and social role of geography needed to be rearticulated within the framework of the Cold War and liberal democracy.

In the first section of this paper I will examine how West German geographers after 1945 tried to understand the discipline's recent history by taking a closer look at an influential paper published by Carl Troll in 1947. I will specify how Troll as one of the leading and politically more sensitive geographers in post-war Germany wrote about both his personal and the discipline's involvement in National Socialism. The main focus is on the way Troll tried to cleanse geography and geographers from a direct involvement with the Nazis, and instead portray geography as a victim of National Socialism and the war.

I then ask what the defeat of Germany – and it was experienced as a defeat not as a liberation by most Germans and many geographers¹ – and the experiences of the war in general meant for how geographers in Germany thought about the relation between the discipline and politics. It might seem that geography in Germany after the war continued its pre-1933 trajectory until the quantitative turn of the late 1960s. But I will argue that these cleansing and legitimating strategies went hand in hand with a very quick adaption to the new world order and the new role of geography for the Fordist welfare state by rebranding geography as a science of peace and democratic values.

A significant number of geographers in Germany before 1945, and before 1933, were strongly militarist and expansionist and saw the production and communication of knowledge relevant for war as a part of their job. This sentiment existed since geography became institutionalized in the expanding German academia in the late 19th century, but became stronger after World War I. Such a knowledge, it was assumed, would be important for the civilian population, in schools, as well as the military. Be it in the form of geopolitics, military or defense geography (Banse, 1933; Haushofer, 1941) or in the form of detailed regional knowledge as implied in Ewald Banse's book *“Das mußst du von Russland wissen!”* (“This you need to know about Russia!”) (Banse, 1939) published two years before the invasion. Authors like Ewald Banse, Siegfried Passarge, Karl Haushofer or Oswald Muris in the 1920s and 1930s made clear that geography is key to winning wars. Not only is “knowledge power” but by extension “geographical knowledge is world power” (Brogiato, 1998). These claims were supported by the “dynamism” of National Socialism and the underlying notion that history and geography were constituted by conflicts over space. History and geography were therefore seen as a constant struggle of spatial forces (*Raumkräfte*). Ideas such as *Lebensraum* or *Kulturboden* in which people and soil were deeply linked were also calls for action and not static concepts. One also should keep in mind that for someone like Ratzel during the late 19th century war was a normal part of the life and death of states. Thus militarism and

expansionism were not minor issues. Instead they were essential for much of the post-Hettner writing in German geography, and foundational to much of the post-World War I mood in the discipline, when the relative modernist perspective of authors like Ratzel or Hettner turned into the dominance of a anti-modernist cultural pessimism (Schultz, 1996, 2008).

After the end of World War II, however, and discussed below, geography – either in form of the traditional regional paradigm of *Länderkunde* or in the more functionalist and modernized social geography – was reinvented by a number of German geographers as essentially a science of peace. When writing about the role of geography in and for society, education and politics – something that surely remained rare compared to the majority of geographical publications – this notion of geography as a natural ally of peaceful coexistence became a central argument. Geography's new guise, the paper will argue, was strongly connected to the rise of the Cold War, West Germany's orientation towards the western powers and embedded within a developmentalist framework. Contrary to Yves Lacoste's claim that geography is first and foremost about the waging of war (Lacoste, 1976), German geographers, when writing about the relation between geography and politics, after the end of World War II claimed that geography was foremost about the gaining and sustaining of peace.

2. Carl Troll and geography's self-image after 1945

In the 1947 first issue of *Erdkunde*, the first geographical journal to be published in the western German occupation zone, its editor and founder Carl Troll published a “critique and justification” of German geography between 1933 and 1945 (Troll, 1947a). Two years later and following a discussion at the meeting of the AAG 1947 in Charlottesville a translation appeared in the “Annals of the Association of American Geographers” (Troll, 1949). This translation was supplemented by forewords by the editors and the translator, Eric Fischer, as well as extensive commentary in footnotes and a glossary on a number of German terms.

Born in 1899 and starting his career with work on South America, since the late 1930s Carl Troll had been professor of geography at the University of Bonn. He would become one of the leading figures of postwar German geography, and President of the International Geographical Union (IGU) in the early 1960s. While most of his work was in physical geography, he published on a wide range of sub-fields and regions (Lauer, 1976). His relation to National Socialism was ambivalent. He was never a party member, and he was attacked in the early 1930s by other geographers for being a liberal democrat and for defending a Jewish colleague. His personal correspondence in the 1930s and early 1940s at times shows some distance to the regime and a critique of geographers whose promotion into powerful positions he saw as political decisions (such as Schulz-Kampfenkel, head of the special reconnaissance unit, the *Forschungsstaffel z.b.V* (Troll, 1939, 1940)). But at the same time he was able to accomplish a successful career during the late 1930s and early 40s and worked closely with the regime and the military (Böhm, 2003). The chair he was offered in 1936, and then another one in 1938, only became vacant after their holders fled Germany.² And in his wartime writing there is an occasional ethnocentric and anti-Semitic undertone (e.g. in the way he links the Jewish

¹ It was only in 1985 when President Richard von Weizsäcker in an address to the Bundestag famously proclaimed that May 8th, 1945 was a day of liberation. Reading geographers of the late 1940s and early 1950s one frequently gets the impression that “the catastrophe” only began in the miserable situation after 1945 e.g. (Meynen, 1952; Schmitthenner, 1951).

² Alfred Rühl was professor at the University of Berlin. Due to his Jewish grandfather and political opposition he suffered repressions under the new regime. In 1935, and after an unsuccessful surgery, he took his own life during a stay in Switzerland. Leo Waibel was professor at the University of Bonn. He was married to a Jewish woman and publicly opposed the introduction of Nazi “Race Studies” into geography. In 1937 he was forced into retirement and in 1939 emigrated to the United States.

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