



Feature: European Geographers and World War II

## Continental European geographers and World War II

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### Abstract

This special issue considers the lives and work of Continental European Geographers during World War II. There is a range of work on the complicity of American and British geographers in this global conflict, but barely any consideration of geographers in mainland Europe. The six essays collected here provide detailed biographical and regionally specific case studies of the entanglements between geography and war in France, Germany, Denmark, Hungary, Romania and The Soviet Union between 1939 and 1945. This introduction delineates this important gap in the literature on the liaison between geography, geographers and World War II, and flags a number of ways in which it might be conceptualised and contextualised.

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I still find myself wondering whether there is not always some deep similarity between the way war organizes space and movement and the way contemporary society organizes them: that is, if the military landscape and military society are not both in essence intensified versions of the peacetime landscape, intensified and vitalized by one overriding purpose, which, of necessity, brings about a closer relationship between man [sic] and environment and between men.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote the American landscape writer John Brinckerhoff Jackson, reflecting on his military service as an intelligence officer with the 9th Infantry Division of the United States (US) Army in Europe and North Africa in World War II, and particularly on his time in the Hürtgen Forest in 1944, fighting in the largest and longest land battle the US Army had ever waged.

Jackson titled his reminiscences 'Landscape as seen by the military'. He began with the observation that the environment was not an 'empty stage' on which war unfolded, but was the medium through which it was conducted. While in the midst of battle at Hürtgen, Jackson initially imagined the European landscapes of war and peace as similarly 'orderly and intelligent', 'regimented' by

innumerable 'insignia of rank'. But after the fighting was over, he realised that such similitude was an 'illusion'. He recognised that the 'clear-cut boundaries' and 'well-established units' in the wartime landscape were in reality 'blurred', and that the 'boundaries and demarcations' that existed within the peacetime landscape had after the battle 'ceased to mean anything'.<sup>2</sup>

Jackson thought his initial confusion was a result of the American military's own contradictory impulses. While it visualised relationships between people and environment as harmonious and stable, its ultimate aim was to destroy that very harmony. The American military believed on the one hand that Western Europe's long-lived cultural landscape possessed an 'intensified and vitalized' graspable order. But on the other hand in pursuing war it also believed that order should be brutally undone. In Jackson's example: 'the various headquarters and command posts [that] we had so carefully marked on [our map's] acetate overlay proved to be nothing more than heaps of rain-soaked ruins littered with mimographed orders that no one had bothered to obey or even read'.<sup>3</sup>

Jackson's experience of combat shaped him also as a landscape scholar. Even in the sound and fury of battle in Hürtgen Forest he thought about the geography classes he took with Derwent

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Whittlesey at Harvard. He remembered, too, the influence of a chance encounter (he called it a 'revelation'): the months he spent in the ample library of a Norman chateau where he was billeted in 1944. There he found and read works by Paul Vidal de la Blache and other French (and German) geographers that influenced how he subsequently 'read landscapes'.<sup>4</sup> Jackson's 'revelations' exemplified what the French *Annales* scholar Marc Bloch described, in his own wartime journal, as the 'alteration of spatial values' and disorienting 'rhythm of the times' that war brought to the lives and outlooks of scholars and intellectuals.<sup>5</sup>

While few, if any, universities and academic careers were left untouched by the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1939, different disciplines and individual practitioners experienced war on various kinds of footings. For Jackson it was as a recorder and interpreter of information for military intelligence. Again his earlier geographical classes with Whittlesey were invaluable. Military intelligence in the field, Jackson wrote, 'was almost totally dependent on the ordinance map for its information about the terrain'.<sup>6</sup> Geographical representation in the form of the map was central both on the battlefield and in the war office.

### Geographers' wars and war's geographies

Jackson's reflections on his wartime experience point to many of the issues pursued in this special issue. Like Jackson, the authors here are also concerned with the intimate, complex and often fraught wartime intertwining of a life (a biography and specific personal circumstances) with geographical ideas and knowledges (both as disciplinary concepts, practices and conventions, and wider geographical perceptions and discourses). Also like Jackson, the authors think it important to locate World War II within geography's disciplinary history rather than treating it as a disorienting exception (that is, if it is mentioned at all). One of the recent motivations for writing critical and contextual histories of geography and geographical knowledge is to overhaul narrow (internalist) and whiggish accounts of disciplinary change and growth. Those accounts too often shuffle the messy complexities and contingencies of society and history, and indeed of war, out of their narratives. In contrast, one of the aims of this special issue is to recoup precisely such messiness, treating it as central rather than peripheral to geography's history.

This special issue comes at a particular moment in the discipline's engagement with questions of war, violence and conflict. Over the last fifteen years or so there has been a dramatic growth of interest within (and also outside) the discipline in geographies of war. In part it follows from Jackson's general lament: about spatial order cherished and destroyed, and landscapes and lives broken.<sup>7</sup>

An enormous and eclectic literature now pursues the questions Jackson raised: how war organises space, how geography shapes war, and how geographies of war change. Derek Gregory, for instance, notes that geographical knowledge and spatial technologies have long had a pivotal place in 'the resort to war', 'the conduct of war', 'the representation of war', and 'the memorialization of war'.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, critical concern with contemporary conflict should not preclude interest in past wars, or in using knowledge of them to understand the present.

Public and scholarly interest in the historical and philosophical justification of warfare was most recently piqued by the West's justification for the invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam Hussein in the wake of '9/11', and the wider 'war on terror'.<sup>9</sup> There is now a broad fascination with how war targets people and territory (histories and techniques of bombing, military occupation, prisoner detention). And through the rapid digitisation of information, and (in some parts of the world) the democratization of public access to historical knowledge (in formerly communist East Europe and the Soviet Union, for example), there is much newly available knowledge from the hitherto closed archives of war – of lies and secrets; of evil, cruelty and mendacity in human conduct; of erstwhile scrambling and subversion of accepted understandings; of retrospective codification of triumph and defeat; and of images and documents of loss and destruction.

Critical energies in the discipline of geography are currently focused largely on contemporary 'warscapes' and 'sites of violence', and the geographical imaginaries and spatial practices (of demonising, targeting, bombing, insurgency, counter-insurgency and revolt) in what Gregory and others see as an 'everywhere war'.<sup>10</sup> This literature is concerned primarily with Yves Lacoste's maxim (written in the aftermath of the Vietnam War), that '*La géographie, ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre*' [geography serves firstly to wage war].<sup>11</sup> Less interest, though, has been shown in the other major theme in Jackson's story (and in Lacoste's too): the witting or unwitting role that geographers have played in war.<sup>12</sup> The current literature primarily discloses the geographies and spaces in and through which war is expedited rather than the connivance of the discipline of geography in the wartime practices deployed in those geographies and spaces (although there are important exceptions).<sup>13</sup>

In providing an account of geography's disciplinary connivance during World War II the papers in this special issue are of course not opposed to wider critical histories. They are concerned rather with the relations and tensions between the two approaches as ways of seeing. Some of the papers (outlined below) lean more towards biography, either of individuals (especially the papers by

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, Landscape (note 1), 137.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, New York, 1968, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, Landscape (note 1), 136.

<sup>7</sup> See recently, K. Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*, New York, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> D. Gregory, War, in: D. Gregory, R. Johnston, G. Pratt, M. Watts, S. Whatmore (Eds), *The Dictionary of Human Geography* 5th Edition, Oxford, 2009, 804.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, M. Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa*, Chicago, 2004; G. Chamayou, *Théorie du Drone*, Paris, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> D. Gregory, The everywhere war, *The Geographical Journal* 177 (2011) 238–250; And see, for example, D. Cowen and E. Gilbert (Eds), *War, Citizenship, Territory*, London and New York, 2008; C. Flint (Ed), *The Geography of War and Peace*, Oxford, 2005; W. Giles and J. Hyndman (Eds), *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, Berkeley, 2004; D. Gregory, War and peace, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2010) 154–86; D. Gregory and A. Pred (Eds), *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror and Political Violence*, London and New York, 2007; A. Kobayashi (Ed), Geographies of peace and armed conflict, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* special issue 99 (2009); B. Korf, M. Engeler and T. Hagmann, The geography of warscape, *Third World Quarterly* 31 (2010) 385–99; S. Kirsch and C. Flint (Eds), *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies*, Farnham, 2011; E. Mendieta, War the school of space: the space of war and the war for space, *Ethics, Place and Environment* 9 (2006) 207–29; C. Philo, Security of geography/geography of security, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37 (2012) 1–7.

<sup>11</sup> Y. Lacoste, *La géographie, ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre*, Paris, 1976; and see G. Bowd and D. Clayton, Geographical warfare in the tropics: Yves Lacoste and the Vietnam War, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103 (2013) 627–646.

<sup>12</sup> When Lacoste wrote about geography serving firstly to wage war he had in mind, as a primary example, the way the fastidious maps of the dyke system of the Tonkin delta of North Vietnam produced in the 1930s by the French geographer Pierre Gourou – works of scholarship – had been used by United States Air Force strategists and pilots to bomb the region. Lacoste's point was that geographical knowledge, however 'objective' or 'innocent,' always had the potential to be co-opted and used for martial ends. On this story, see Bowd and Clayton, Geographical warfare (note 11).

<sup>13</sup> See J. Crampton, S. Roberts and A. Poorhuis, The new political economy of geographical intelligence, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 104 (2014) 196–214.

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