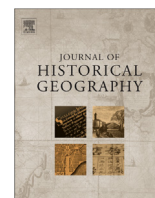




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Feature: European Geographers and World War II

Geopolitics on trial: politics and science in the wartime geopolitics of Gudmund Hatt



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Abstract

The history of Danish geographers during the Second World War is almost synonymous with that of Gudmund Hatt (1884–1960), the Professor of Human Geography at Copenhagen University. Hatt was a key figure in the development of Danish geography and assumed the role of a public intellectual, particularly through his geopolitical analyses as they unfolded in a staggering number of radio speeches, newspaper essays, books and articles during the late 1930s and early 1940s. But this industriousness, which accelerated during the first years of the Nazi-German occupation of Denmark (9 April 1940–5 May 1945), was also the direct reason for Hatt's hard downfall – academically as well as personally. For his wartime activities, Hatt was as the only Danish university professor tried by a post-war public servants' tribunal. It found that he had engaged in 'dishonourable national conduct' during the occupation and dismissed him from his professorship. Drawing on archives and published sources from the period, the paper focuses on Hatt's wartime activities and geopolitical analyses in the complicated political context of the occupation, and it pays particular attention to the conflict between 'science' and 'politics' as it crystallised in the post-war trial of Hatt.

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It is not often that geographers are on the front page. Yet on New Year's Day 1941, nine months into the Nazi-German occupation of Denmark, the respected *Berlingske Tidende* put its entire front page – and most of the following four broadsheet-pages – at the disposal of Gudmund Hatt, the Professor of Human Geography at Copenhagen University. The distance between being a star or a scoundrel can be short, particularly in times of war. As a historian of the occupation succinctly put it: 'What was nationally permissible in 1940/41 appeared unforgivable by 1942/43.'¹ By late 1941, when Nazi Germany no longer seemed destined to master the European continent, *Berlingske Tidende* was quietly distancing itself from Hatt, and his public activities finally stopped when the Danish government in August 1943 ceased to function. But on liberation day, 5 May 1945, the once-revered geography professor was arrested and interned by the resistance movement. This was a result of his geopolitical commentaries and related activities during

the occupation. Hatt's wrongdoings did not amount to actual treason, but he was prosecuted by the Extraordinary Public Servants' Tribunal (*Den ekstraordinære Tjenestemandsdømstol*), which found him guilty of having engaged in 'dishonourable national conduct' (*uværdig national Optræden*) during the occupation and deprived him of his professorship. Whereas leading German geopolitical theorists, such as Karl Haushofer, were to escape prosecution after the war, Hatt, like J.G. Loohuis in the Netherlands, was brought to account for his wartime activities.² But in early 1941 all that was still to come. In his extended New Year's Day article, Hatt narrated the events of the previous year, which had placed much of Europe under the heel of Nazi-Germany and also led to the occupation of Denmark. He, like most other Danes, expected to live under an inescapable Nazi hegemony for decades to come: 'The defeated nations on Europe's mainland had to collect themselves to a new situation', as Hatt guardedly put it.³

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¹ H. Kirchhoff, *Samarbejde og modstand under besættelsen* (second edition), Odense, 2004, 12.

² On Haushofer, see T. Barnes and C. Abrahamson, No comedy, only tragedy: the Haushofers, father and son, and the spaces of Nazi geopolitics, paper presented at the RGS-IBG annual conference, Edinburgh, 2012; on Loohuis, see H. van der Wusten and B. de Pater, How German geopolitics passed through the Netherlands, 1920–1945, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 104 (2013) 426–438.

³ G. Hatt, Verdenspolitisk Nytaar (World political New Year), *Berlingske Tidende*, Copenhagen, 1 January 1941, 3.

Indeed, for the vast majority of Danes, the first years of the Nazi-German occupation were all about adapting to 'a new situation'.⁴ From the outset of the virtually unopposed occupation on 9 April 1940, both the occupying power and the leading Danish politicians found it opportune to portray the assault as a 'peace occupation'. This implied a fiction of Denmark remaining both sovereign and neutral, albeit under German 'protection'. Danish-German relations were accordingly managed through the respective foreign offices and legations, notably the German legation in Copenhagen. To run this delicate and increasingly tense arrangement, the social-democratic and social-liberal coalition government was reorganised to include ministers from the major opposition parties, the liberal and conservative parties. Pivotal here was Erik Scavenius (1877–1962), a professional diplomat and politician affiliated with the Social-Liberal Party, who in July 1940 was brought into government as foreign minister and eventually, in November 1942, became prime minister. As responsible for relations with the occupying power, and as long-standing exponent of the view that Danish foreign policy should adapt to neighbouring Germany, Scavenius was (and is) arguably the most embattled figure in modern Danish history. For some, he successfully pursued a necessary if unheroic policy of appeasement based on small-state realism, which ensured that Nazism never gained a direct foothold in Danish politics and that Danish society generally avoided the murderous destruction inflicted on other countries under Nazi-German occupation. For others, Scavenius was the embodiment of a cynical (if not outright immoral) adaption to Nazi-German demands.⁵ Danish sovereignty and neutrality under Nazi-German occupation was a fiction, of course. Yet it was a fiction with considerable substance, which for more than three years bestowed politicians and the wider society with a significant if always fraught and fragile measure of independence. That ended on 29 August 1943 when the politically battered government ceased functioning in the face of widespread strikes and unacceptable German counter-demands. From that point on, until liberation on 5 May 1945, the Wehrmacht took over and imposed martial law (although a low-key version of the politics of cooperation continued with senior civil servants as the figureheads). Referring particularly to the period from 9 April 1940 to 29 August 1943, the Danish government's position with respect to the Nazi-German occupier has been variously described as a policy of 'cooperation' (*samarbejde*), 'concession' (*indrømmelse*), 'negotiation' (*forhandling*), 'adaption' (*tilpasning*) and 'collaboration' (*kollaboration*). The choice of term is not trivial, with each signalling a different and potentially competing interpretation of the political history.⁶ But following standard Danish practise, I will pragmatically describe the first phase of the occupation as the politics of cooperation.

Hatt's wartime history is crucially connected to the first phase of the occupation and the politics of cooperation. This, it should be kept in mind, was a period that defies neat divisions between 'right' and 'wrong'. Like the vast majority of Danes, Hatt lived in a world of

often contradictory and – particularly when seen from some distance – more or less compromising shades of grey. Partly for this reason, he is a vivid and frequently troubling example of just how varied a geographer's life could unfold in the interstices of the warring states. The broader outline of Hatt's life and work has been addressed elsewhere.⁷ This article focuses on Hatt only within the context of World War II and the Nazi-German occupation of Denmark. Partly my aim is to analyse how a geographer from a small and highly exposed country was caught up in the cataclysmic events of war and occupation. But partly it is also to contribute to wider debates on the politics of geography, and the embedding of geographical knowledge and practices within wider historical geographies.

Evidence

From an unassuming background as the son of a village teacher in the peripheral region of western Jutland, (Aage) Gudmund Hatt (1884–1960) worked his way up to become a member of Denmark's intellectual elite. In 1929 this ascent was crowned by the award of a Chair in Human Geography at Copenhagen University. At the time this made him one of only two Danish geography professors.⁸ The history of Hatt is thus to a large extent the history of Danish university geography during the war, and he was the only geographer to be caught up in the intricate politics of the occupation. It was an interest in ethnography that brought Hatt to geography, a common path at the time, and later he also developed an interest in archaeology. But stemming from his co-authorship of the four-volume *Jorden og Menneskelivet* (*The Earth and the Human Life*, 1922–1927) with the Copenhagen professor of physical geography, Martin Vahl, his human geography focus was colonial anthropology and geopolitics. In his post-war statement to the public servants' tribunal, where Hatt prudently sought to avoid the tainted notion of 'geopolitics', he explained that *Jorden og Menneskelivet* had been 'an introduction to political geography. The study of different countries' cultures, population, economies and politics gave me a material from which a political-geographical understanding could be built'.⁹ This led him to consider the material and geographical foundations of the great power conflicts, a theme from around 1940 he began to address in terms of *Livsrum* (living-space) and *Livsrumspolitik* (living-space politics).¹⁰

'The eminent foreign-policy writer'

Hatt's work in and around geopolitics had even before the occupation made him a 'public intellectual'. During the late 1920s he published some academic articles that today can be recognised as geopolitical.¹¹ But it was in radio lectures aired by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (*Statsradiofonien*) from 1935 that he

⁴ For an overview of the occupation history, see H. Nathaniel, *Occupied: Denmark's Adaption and Resistance to German Occupation 1940–1945*, Copenhagen, 2012.

⁵ On post-war narratives of the occupation, see C. Bryld, 'The five accursed years': Danish perception and usage of the period of the German Occupation, with a wider view to Norway and Sweden, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 32 (2007) 86–115; N.A. Sørensen, Narrating the Second World War in Denmark since 1945, *Contemporary European History* 14 (2005) 295–315.

⁶ H. Dethlefsen, Denmark and the German occupation: cooperation, negotiation or collaboration? *Scandinavian Journal of History* 15 (1990) 193–206.

⁷ H.G. Larsen, Gudmund Hatt 1884–1960, in: H. Lorimer, C.W.J. Withers (Eds), *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies*, Vol. 28, London, 2009, 17–37.

⁸ On the history of Danish geography, see S. Christiansen, N.K. Jacobsen, and N. Nielsen, Geografi, in: T. Wolff (Ed), *Københavns Universitet 1479–1979*, Vol. XIII, Copenhagen, 1979, 377–446; for an outline in English, see S. Christiansen, *Geography in Denmark*, *Belgeo* (2004) 59–68.

⁹ Redegørelse fra Tiltalte (Statement by the indicted), 10 December 1945, Danish State Archives, Copenhagen, Auditøren ved Den ekstraordinære Tjenestemandsdømstol (The Prosecutor for the Extraordinary Public Servants' Tribunal), case number T.225 [hereafter T.225]. The 35 pages long statement is the most substantial source on Hatt's own view of his activities during the occupation. Judged by the available press reports and the records of the extraordinary public servants' tribunal, he did not depart from the written statement during the trial. The document will in the following be indicated as Hatt's 'post-war statement'.

¹⁰ H.G. Larsen, 'The need and ability for expansion': conceptions of living space in the small-state geopolitics of Gudmund Hatt, *Political Geography* 30 (2011) 38–48.

¹¹ For example: G. Hatt, 'Menneskeracerne og deres Udbredelsesmuligheder', *Geografisk Tidsskrift* 31 (1928) 151–163, 214–232; G. Hatt, Begrebet 'Mellemeuropa', *Geografisk Tidsskrift* 32 (1929) 92–115.

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