

The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer “Educated” Hitler and Hess. **London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016**

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This review is occasioned by Holger Herwig’s book rather than about it. The book is a detailed account of Karl Haushofer’s life (1869–1946). Born in 1869, Haushofer was the son of Max Haushofer, a professor of economics and statistics at the Royal Polytechnical University in Munich. Max Haushofer was the author of *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*). Karl Haushofer entered the Bavarian army in 1887 and the War Academy in 1895. Following graduation, he took up an officer posting with the Bavarian General Staff. In 1908, the General Staff sent Haushofer on an extended study trip to Japan. There, Haushofer was mesmerized by the school curriculum of history, ethics, gymnastics, and visits to warrior sites that nourished a military ethos within society. He came

to believe that this civil-military relationship created the perfect harmony of people, nature, and state necessary for Japan’s greatness. On his and Martha’s return, Haushofer wrote *Dai Nihon* (1913), “Great Japan,” a tract intended (in his words) to “direct Central Europe’s gaze to the strengthening and rejuvenation that Japan owes to the storm of steel [generated by] its wars” (17). To Haushofer, war was “the last great test of a nation’s right to exist,” it was a “struggle for elbow room,” and it was the “ultimate arbiter” of relations between states (100). Not only had the Japanese proven themselves in war, defeating China and Russia, but they had also annexed Korea, thereby securing *Lebensraum*.

This book documents Karl Haushofer as an individual—his life as an officer, a husband, a father, a professor, a writer, and so on. I am not interested in what he ate for breakfast, but rather what he thought about all night—Geopolitics. And there are sections in the book that does examine how Haushofer moved from physical to “biological” geography. Who were Haushofer’s mentors? How did he disseminate his thoughts? And who were his readers? My argument is: Haushofer’s fateful ideas were rooted in classical geography, especially the work of Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). In turn, Haushofer then trained his student Rudolf Hess (1894–1987), personal secretary to Adolf Hitler and Deputy Führer until in 1941 when he parachuted into Scotland to negotiate a peace treaty with the Duke of Hamilton. Hess was assistant to Adolf Hitler during the writing of *Mein Kampf*, that supposedly set out the political platform for the National Socialist German Workers Party (the Nazi Party). Herwig argues that Hitler was merely a symbol and a rabble-rousing mouthpiece, but the intellectual content of which he was the symbol was the doctrine of Haushofer.

My argument is merely: Classical Geography was the political-theoretical ideology behind a movement (Nazism) that killed 70 million people during World War II. Geography was a leading discipline in the West European countries during the nineteenth century. In Britain and France especially, geography theoretically informed power and educated children in the facts of global imperialism—where cocoa was grown and tin mined. Germany was a little different. The original urge was unification—cohering myriad independent cities and states into a single “nation” under the aegis of

Prussia. Once united, the nation became externally imperialistic. Friedrich Ratzel was Chair of the Geography Department at the University of Leipzig, second oldest university in Germany, a powerful institution with famous alumni (Friedrich Nietzsche, for example). Ratzel's ideas were formed on the latest frontier of biological and social science, Lamarckian and Darwinian biology, as synthesized by Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) into “applied biology” (“applied” to the social sciences). Ratzel saw society as an organism (the unity of organic life) with land supplying resources necessary for existence, an organism that had needs for “living space” (*lebensraum*). As population grew, the society was forced to struggle for existence by expanding in space—living organisms that grew or contracted, depending on how they wielded “spatial dynamics of power.” Supposed racial characteristics, of mentality as well as stature, went from the local earth “through the blood” to generations of linked people. This is a widely-held notion—its “in your blood” to consistently act in distinct ways, and your blood flows from the rock and soil of your people's region. These were (are) powerful, dangerous, fundamentally mistaken ideas—because, you see, as Giddens (1981), in a rare moment of insight, exclaimed: “societies are not organisms.”

Karl Haushofer was Privatdozent for political geography at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. Here he defined geopolitics as “the duty to safeguard the right to the soil, to the land, within the Reich, but also to more extensive Volk lands under the direction of a supreme leader” (Baofu, 2010: 210). His direct experience in the German military and diplomatic corps turned geopolitics into a system of normative doctrines for political policy. Haushofer's geography student, Rudolf Hess, then took these ideas into the heart of

the developing Nazi movement, as Deputy Führer of the NSDAP, as Minister and member of the Cabinet Council and the Council of Ministers for Defense of the Reich. When Hitler made Hermann Göring his official successor in 1939, he named Hess as next in line for the job. Haushofer and Hess passed the crazy ideas of classical geography (through tutorials for example) on to Hitler.

It was not just Hitler. British geographer and Director of the London School of Economics, Halford Mackinder thought that natural regions have “flows of sap and blood coursing through their plants and animals, on loan for the moment in the 40 million bodies of the present generation of English people” (Kearns, 2009: 74), lending them the fluid essence of their superior national characteristics. Mackinder was a strong advocate of British imperialism, arguing that colonies in Africa and Asia constituted a safety valve for European society. For this he was made “Sir” Halford. Both Hitler and Halford were turned crazy by organicist geography, geo-racism, geopolitics, and lebensraumic imperialism.

It's “us” geographers that did it. Or, rather “them”, the founders of our awful discipline. Geography has to be Marxist—labor makes history, not sap, nor even soup. Otherwise, geography becomes the founding belief for the rant of utterly dangerous maniacs.

References

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