



Критическое историко-политологическое исследование немецкой геополитики как пространственно-политической концептуальной парадигмы

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Аннотация. Жизненное пространство (Lebensraum) представляло собой центральную идеологическую конструкцию и геополитический императив действий властных элит «Третьего рейха». Сам термин, однако, был введен не ими. На самом деле, он был введен в научный оборот еще на рубеже XX века немецким географом и зоологом Фридрихом Ратцелем (1844–1904). Его многочисленные труды по политической географии, рассматривавшиеся в международном контексте взаимосвязь пространства, государства и народа – предоставили нацистским идеологам удобный источник тезисов для разработки их собственных псевдонаучных и радикальных теоретических построений. Тем не менее дискуссионным остается вопрос о том, можно ли в связи с этим считать Ратцеля предшественником их экспансионистской политики жизненного пространства («Lebensraum policy»). По этой причине после 1945 года геополитические исследования были восприняты негативно и впоследствии были отвергнуты немецким научным обществом. Однако в условиях геополитических преобразований после 1989 года «пространство» вновь было переосмыслено. В частности, в рамках социальных и гуманитарных наук география перестала рассматриваться как главный ориентир внешней политики. Вместо этого политически насыщенное географическое пространство – геополитика – понималось как политическое, социальное и культурное конструирование через дискурс. Геоэкономика, начиная с 1989 года, не вытеснила геополитическую мысль и практику, а, напротив, снабдила ее дополнительными ресурсами и инструментами.

Ключевые слова: геополитика, Ратцель, Хаусхофер, жизненное пространство, политическая географии, пространственный переворот, геоэкономика

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Critical Historiographical-Political Science Policy Paper on German Geopolitics as a Spatial-Political Conceptual Paradigm

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Abstract. Living space “Lebensraum” constituted a central ideological construct and a geopolitical imperative of action for the power elites of the ‘Third Reich’. The term itself, however, did not originate with them. Rather, it had already been coined at the turn of the 20th century by the German geographer and zoologist Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904). His numerous political-geographical writings, concerned

internationally with space, state and people, offered Nazi ideologues a convenient reservoir of theses for the development of their own pseudo-scientific and radical theoretical edifices. Nevertheless, it remains debatable whether Ratzel can thereby be considered a precursor to their expansionist, geopolitical Lebensraum policy. For this reason, after 1945, geopolitical research was stigmatized and subsequently rejected within German academia. In the wake of the geopolitical reconfigurations after 1989, however, 'space' was once again rediscovered. Particularly within the cultural and social sciences, geography ceased to be regarded as the dominant compass of foreign policy. Instead, politically charged geographical space – geopolitics – was understood as being politically, socially, and culturally constructed through discourse. Geo-economics, since 1989, has not supplanted geopolitical thought and practice but has rather provided it with additional resources and instruments.

Keywords: geopolitics, Ratzel, Haushofer, living space, political geography, spatial turn, geoeconomics

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OBJECTIVE OF THE CONTRIBUTION

The opening section of this analysis provides a concise historical overview of the development of spatial-political concepts commonly understood as geopolitics in Germany, which until 1945 was a central locus for such theoretical innovations in Europe. It critically engages with a widely held thesis in segments of German historiography and political science [Schulz, 2010, pp. 52–57], which positions the geographer and zoologist Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) as an ideological forerunner and intellectual architect of the Nazi concept of Lebensraum, through his early 20th century formulation of Political Geography.

Yet any historical reception must account for the specific context in which ideas emerge, and one cannot easily escape the biases of present-oriented interpretation. Against this backdrop, the author contends that Ratzel's geodeterministic theory of the state was only partially compatible with the ideological-geopolitical frameworks later adopted by the National Socialists. They appropriated his theories selectively and rhetorically, overlaying them with biological racism to radicalize geopolitics. As the Political scientist and geographer Detlef Herold notes: "*Die Geopolitik paßte sich immer mehr „den Bedingungen politischen Wollens“ an und verlor zunehmend die Mitarbeit der wissenschaftlichen Geographie*"¹. Furthermore, the conceptual apparatus of Lebensraum within Ratzel's Political Geography was, in practical terms, of only marginal relevance for the imperial,

large-scale territorial expansion undertaken by the Nazi regime in the subsequent decades.

In the second, shorter chapter, this contribution briefly deconstructs several established geopolitical assumptions and narrative-driven geopolitical discourses. It argues that political conceptions of space along with their associated structures of interest and power, which influence and, in some cases, govern international politics are neither natural nor objectively given, but socially constructed, shaping political and social realities. Geo-economics has not emerged as an alternative framework to geopolitics; rather, the two are deeply intertwined.

METHODOLOGY

This contribution is guided, as far as possible, by the concept of historical understanding developed by the historian Johann Gustav J. Droysen. According to Droysen, "*das Wesen der Geschichte... forschend zu verstehen, ist die Interpretation*" [Droysen 1977, p. 22]. He outlines a six-step process:

- 1) source research,
- 2) source criticism (authenticity),
- 3) ragmatic interpretation (supplementing sources with additional knowledge),
- 4) conditions of interpretation (considering the interests of others),
- 5) psychological interpretation (examining the motives behind what is said or intended) and
- 6) interpretation of ideas (assessing the function of events in their historical significance).

PART 1: THEMATIC INTRODUCTION

Human thought unfolds within a four-dimensional space-time continuum. However, this is not uniquely characteristic of Homo sapiens. Research in cognitive

¹Herold, D. (1973). Politische Geographie und Geopolitik. Ihre historisch-politisch bedingte Entwicklung.

URL: <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/archiv/529239/politische-geographie-und-geopolitik-ihre-historisch-politisch-bedingte-entwicklung-und-neue-forschungsansaeetze-am-beispiel-der-vergrosstaenderung/> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

ethology shows that even animals with relatively simple brains or those that move primarily in a linear fashion possess at least rudimentary spatial orientation abilities. Similarly, the perception of time is a universal biological pattern. Highly developed species, such as elephants, dolphins, and rhesus monkeys, have long-term memory, can perceive time intervals, and remember locations or encounters. All living organisms, both fauna and flora, influence spatial ecosystems. Yet only humans are capable of apocalyptic spatial destruction.

The influence of nature on human living space and humanity's dependence on geographic space, runs throughout human history. The interplay between natural space or the spatial environment and political life, political action and power relations is already reflected in ancient records. For centuries, humans have sought both to measure and map the Earth's surface as a geographic space and to investigate and understand the origin, structure, and development of the universe. In this endeavor, classical geography and cosmology (astronomy) were conceptually fused under the term cosmography. An early medieval, anonymously authored cosmographic representation of the known world around 700 CE originates from Byzantine Ravenna¹. A synthesis of geography and history is provided by the Nuremberg Chronicle (Schedel's World Chronicle) of 1493².

RATZEL AND KJELLÉN AS PIONEERS OF GEOPOLITICS AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

In the 18th century, political geography in Europe was understood primarily as the statistical study of countries or states. It functioned as an auxiliary discipline serving the interests of mercantilism. In the nineteenth century, however, the field became increasingly fragmented. Albrecht Haushofer, son of Karl Haushofer, also a geographer and who was executed by the Gestapo in 1944 for his involvement in the July 20th Resistance – provides a clarifying account in a final work shortly before his death regarding developments in the mid-19th century: “So entstand jener leere Raum, in dem Friedrich Ratzel die neuere Politische Geographie begründet hat”³. In the

preface to the first edition of his internationally acclaimed work in 1897 “*Politische Geographie, oder die Geographie der Staaten, des Verkehrs und des Krieges*”⁴ Ratzel lays out his theoretical advancement toward a Political Geography as “*der vergleichenden Erforschung der Beziehungen zwischen dem Staat und dem Boden*”, motivated by what he saw as the neglect of geographical perspectives within the discipline of political science / public administration: “*Diese Wissenschaft hat sich aber bisher streng ferngehalten von aller räumlichen Betrachtung, Messung, Zählung und Vergleichung der Staaten und Staatenteile; und das ist es ja gerade, was der politischen Geographie erst ihr Leben gibt. Für manche Staatswissenschaftler und Soziologen steht der Staat gerade so in der Luft wie für viele Historiker, und der Boden des Staates ist ihnen nur wie ein größere Art von Grundbesitz*”⁵.

In 1901 Ratzel elaborated on this in his book “*Der Lebensraum*” where he presented the relationship between the human spatial environment / land and political organization / state as a form of human-geographical interactions: “*Der viel mißbrauchte und noch mehr mißverständene Ausdruck Kampf ums Dasein meint eigentlich zunächst Kampf um Raum. Denn Raum ist die allererste Lebensbedingung und am Raum mißt sich das Maß anderer Lebensbedingungen, vor allem der Nahrung. Im Kampf ums Dasein ist dem Raum eine ähnliche Bedeutung zugewiesen wie in jenen entscheidenden Höhepunkten der Völkerkämpfe, die wir Schlachten nennen. Es handelt sich in beiden um die Gewinnung von Raum in vordringenden und zurückweichenden Bewegungen*”⁶.

During Ratzel's lifetime, war was still regarded as a legitimate instrument of politics for advancing national interests. Even the Covenant of the League of Nations of 1919 did not yet stipulate an absolute prohibition of war. It was only with the conclusion of the Briand–Kellogg Pact in 1928 that the foundation was laid for the legal proscription of war under international law. Against this backdrop, Ratzel's position reflected a conceptual 'mainstream' stance within contemporary Europe. “*So wie der Kampf ums Dasein im Grunde immer um Raum geführt wird, sind auch die Kämpfe der Völker vielfach nur Kämpfe Raum, deren Siegespreis daher in allen Kriegen der neueren Geschichte ein Raumgewinn ist oder sein wollte*”⁷.

The debate among academic disciplines over the significance of space unfolded at the turn of the

¹Miller, K. (1898). (2025, July 28). Weltkarte des Ravennaten Miller. Cosmographie, Wikimedia. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Ravenna_Cosmography?uselang=de#/media/File:Weltkarte_des_Ravennaten_Miller_1898_02.jpg (date of access: 25.11.2025).

²Wikisource. (2025, July 28). Schedelsche Weltchronik. https://de.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Schedel%E2%80%99sche_Weltchronik&uselang=de (date of access: 25.11.2025).

³Haushofer, A. Allgemeine Politische Geographie und Geopolitik. https://archive.org/stream/AlbrechtHaushoferAllgemeinePolitischeGeographieUndGeopolitikErsterAllgemeinePolitischeGeographieUndGeopolitik_djvu.txt (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁴Ratzel, F. (1903). Politische Geographie. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_6mkNAAAIAAJ/page/n21/mode/2up (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁵Ibid, p. IV.

⁶Ratzel, F. (1901). Der Lebensraum. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_xyY-AQAAMAAJ/page/n57/mode/2up?view=theater (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁷Ratzel, F. Politische Geographie. (1903). S. 381.

twentieth century, within the brief historical period from 1882 to 1912, when the dominant European great powers having concluded their expansionist rivalry in Africa also partitioned North Africa, with Egypt falling under British control and Morocco under French rule¹. The collapse of socio-economic and political structures in the aftermath of the First World War, together with the implications of Article 231 of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles by which Germany was forced to acknowledge responsibility for the war and accept reparations and territorial concessions, created fertile ground in Germany for the search for alternative state, regional and international orders. All of this provided the impetus for the further development of Ratzel's Political Geography: "Geographen ursprünglich naturwissenschaftlicher Schule (...) wandten sich politisch-geographischen Fragestellungen zu; die politische Selbstbehauptung des deutschen Volkes forderte zweckbestimmte Arbeit der Wissenschaft in der Auseinandersetzung um Grenzen und Lebensraum"².

In other words, Political Geography, operating under the label of Geopolitics, increasingly crystallized as a revisionist ideology directed against the political and territorial consequences of the 'Versailles system.'

In the context of his 1899 research analysis 'Studies on the Political Borders of Sweden', based on historical documents concerning the delimitation of the land border with Norway and the river boundary between Sweden and the Grand Duchy of Finland within the Russian Empire, the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864–1922) declared that his work could not be assigned to any single discipline, since Sweden's borders necessarily concerned the fields of geography, history, international law, statistics, and politics. Methodologically, he will therefore "umfassende Beschreibung der drei Hauptgrenzen erstellen, um sie danach aus einem unter 'anthropogeographischen' – oder, wie ich es in diesem Fall lieber nennen würde, geopolitischen – Gesichtspunkt zu bewerten"³.

Thus, the concept of geopolitics was conceptually introduced into the scientific arena not by a geographer, but by a constitutional lawyer.

Kjellén's thinking about the nature of the state as a geo-organism or bio-organism was inconsistent. In his 1917 publication "Der Staat als Lebensform", the geographical dimension is presented in a contradictory manner: "Die Geopolitik ist die Lehre über den Staat als geographischer Organismus oder Erscheinung im Raum: also der Staat als Land, Territorium Gebiet, oder am ausgeprägtesten als Reich"⁴. In the fourth edition, however, he revises his statement in the 1905 publication, "Die Großmächte der Gegenwart"⁵ which clearly links it to biology: "So sagte ich 1905 in einer Arbeit über die Großmächte, 'kann man nicht umhin, in den Großmächten selbst auch biologische Tatsachen wieder zu erkennen. Aus eigener Lebenskraft und durch die Gunst der Konjunkturen, in ständigem Wettbewerb miteinander, also im Kampf ums Dasein und durch eine natürliche Auswahl stehen auch sie auf der Erdoberfläche da. Wir sehen sie hier geboren werden und aufwachsen, wir haben sie auch wie andere Organismen welken und sterben sehen"⁶.

Kjellén's geographical category of Geopolitics was by no means a coincidental term, for its intellectual connection to the concept of Political Geography is evident. His political-geographical thought was deeply influenced by that of Friedrich Ratzel, who, two years before Kjellén, had addressed the interrelation of geographical space with state politics and its processes and structures of power in his aforementioned book "Politische Geographie" oder "die Geographie der Staaten, des Verkehrs und des Krieges". Within the French academic disciplines, Ratzel's work was received in divergent ways.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim criticized *Political Geography* in the journal he founded and edited, *L'Année Sociologique*, as "a very vague and poorly delineated field of research" [Durkheim, 1897/98, p. 523]. This critique was possibly connected both to Ratzel's reproach regarding sociology's geographical deficiencies and to the fact that *Political Geography* established itself as a competing new field of inquiry. By contrast, Ratzel's French colleague in geography, Vidal de la Blache associated with the school of *géographie humaine* and its emphasis on the correlation between spatial milieu and political forms of life offered a collegial and tolerant assessment, describing it as "a conception of political geography

¹Writing in an accusatory tone in 1941, the influential jurist of constitutional and international law in the Third Reich, Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), stated in "Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung": „Die besiegte europäische Macht, Deutschland, wurde der Kolonien beraubt. (...) Die Ausschließung Deutschlands vom außereuropäischen Kolonialbesitz war die eigentliche Diffamierung und Disqualifizierung Deutschlands als europäischer Macht". <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/vlkerrechtliche-groraumordnung-mit-interventionsverbot-fr-raumfremde-mchte-ein-beitrag-zum-reichsbegriff-im-vlkerrecht-3nbsped-9783428471102-9783428071104-9783428586509.html> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

²Haushofer, A. (1951) Allgemeine Politische Geographie und Geopolitik, 17.

³Kjellén, R. (1899). Studier Öfver Sveriges Politiska Gränser / Studien über die politischen Grenzen Schwedens, 283.

⁴Kjellén, R. (1917). Der Staat als Lebensform. URL: <https://identityhunters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/rudolf-kjellen-der-staat-als-lebensform.pdf> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁵Kjellén, R. (1905). Die Großmächte der Gegenwart. <https://archive.org/details/diegrossmachtet00kjel/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁶Kjellén, R. (1924). Der Staat als Lebensform. <https://archive.org/details/kjellen-rudolf-der-staat-als-lebensform-1924-sandmeier-trans./page/36/mode/2up> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

that essentially corresponds to the present state of scientific knowledge" [Vidal de la Blache, 1898, p. 111].

Ratzel's Political Geography represented a development within political science and state theory of his earlier work *Anthropogeographie*¹ (1882). In that book, he had examined the influence of natural spatial conditions on human settlement patterns, modes of economic production, demography, migration, and related phenomena, as well as their interrelations within historical contexts, thereby establishing Anthropogeography as a scientific subdiscipline of geography. As a trained zoologist, Ratzel frequently employed terminology drawn from that field in his treatise on Political Geography. For this reason, contemporary receptions often accuse him of having "biologized" the concept of the state. A case in point is the dissertation written by Rebin Fard in 2018: *"Schaukeln" oder "Schwanken"? Eine Neubewertung der Geopolitischen Codierungen in der deutschen Außenpolitik nach der deutschen Wiedervereinigung*".

There it is stated that Ratzel conceives of the "state as a biological organism"². Like numerous scholarly colleagues before and after him, however, Fard abbreviates the disputed passage in his citation in such a way that, through the resulting correlation of state and organism, a biologicistic connotation is inevitably suggested. *"So wird denn der Staat zu einem Organismus, in dem ein bestimmter Teil der Erdoberfläche so mit eingeht, daß sich die Eigenschaften des Staates aus denen des Volkes und denen des Bodens zusammensetzen"*³.

For Ratzel, however, it is the political organization of territory, namely, the structure of territorial power, that renders the state an organism, or, in more modern terms, a societal organizational structure. As the original text states: *"So entsteht die politische Organisierung des Bodens, durch die der Staat zu einem Organismus wird, in den ein bestimmter Teil der Erdoberfläche so mit eingeht, als sich die Eigenschaften des Staates aus denen des Volkes und des Bodens zusammensetzen"*⁴. In another passage, he explicitly underscores the incommensurability of the state with a biological organism: *"Der Vergleich des Staates mit hochentwickelten Organismen ist unfruchtbar... die Hauptursache [liegt] in der Beschränkung der Betrachtung auf die Analogien zwischen einem Aggregate vom Menschen und dem Bau eines organischen*

*Wesens. Gerade in den Strukturverhältnissen... liegt der auffallendste Unterschied zwischen dem Staat der Menschen und einem organischen Wesen"*⁵.

NATIONAL SOCIALIST ADAPTABILITY

The following section cites a characteristic passage from Ratzel's 1901 publication *"Der Lebensraum"* – notably predating National Socialism as well as exemplary statements by later leading National Socialist geographers and jurists, such as Karl Haushofer (1869–1946), Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) and Günther Küchenhoff (1907–1983). These illustrate how his general theory of the relationship between *Lebensraum* and people, when detached from its historical context, could decades later be appropriated and rendered serviceable to National Socialist postulates – in the sense of a foreign-policy-oriented, action-guiding propaedeutic, specifically with regard to *Lebensraum* and the German people.

It should be noted: The colonial war of conquest (October 3, 1935 – May 9, 1936) undertaken by the Italian Fascist regime against the Ethiopian Empire, carried out through a pincer movement launched from the colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland, was legitimized by Rome under the claim of acquiring new *spazio vitale* / *Lebensraum* [Rodogno, 2006; Mattioli, Bernhard, 2013]. This constituted the first armed conflict to be "justified" on such grounds and, simultaneously, the first war between two sovereign states that were both members of the recently established League of Nations.

Regardless of his German-nationalist stance, reflected in 1903 in the co-founding of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Verband*, Ratzel did not possess any pre-National Socialist ideology. Similarly, Clausewitz's war-theoretical insights and postulates do not identify him as a potential warmonger with blueprints for the wars that followed his time.

Friedrich Ratzel: *"Ein Volk bleibt nicht durch Generationen auf demselben Boden sitzen, es muss sich ausbreiten, weil es wächst (...) Wächst ein Volk ungestört, so fließt es langsam in der ganzen Peripherie in seine Umgebung über. Wächst es unter inneren Stürmen und Reibungen, so werden Theile nach Außen gedrängt, und andere ziehen sich von selbst in entlegenere Gebiete zurück. In beiden Fällen wächst der Raum mit der Zeit, die nöthig ist, in dem Volke den Übergang zu einer neuen Abart oder Rasse zu bewirken. Wir weisen also Hypothesen des Ursprungs größerer Rassen oder Völkergruppen aus*

¹Ratzel, F. (1882). *Anthropogeographie*. https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_BfwFve1-8EC/page/n7/mode/2up (дата обращения: 25.11.2025).

²Fard, R. (2018). *"Schaukeln" oder "Schwanke"? Eine Neubewertung der Geopolitischen Codierungen in der deutschen Außenpolitik nach der deutschen Wiedervereinigung*. <https://ediss.sub.uni-hamburg.de/bitstream/ediss/8348/1/Dissertation.pdf> (дата обращения: 25.11.2025).

³Ibid.

⁴Ratzel, F. (1901). *Politische Geographie*, 5.

⁵Ibid., p. 13.

engen Gebieten als unwahrscheinlich von vornherein zurück”¹.

Karl Haushofer: *“Ein Volk, dem sein Lebensraum von weltenweiten Betätigungsfeldern in vier Erdteilen und auf allen Weltmeeren (...) herabgedrückt ist auf ein verstümmeltes Reich in Mitteleuropa, in zwei Teile aufgespalten, auf einen ohnmächtigen Kleinstaat und zwei bevormundete Gaue, kann diese herben Worte von F. Ratzel nur entweder wie einer Totenglocke Klang oder wie ein Sporn zu höchster Raumbewältigungsleistung empfinden”* [Haushofer, 1935, p. 454].

The geopolitical scholar² [Jacobsen, 1979] was positively disposed toward Hitler’s power-diplomatic revisionist policies but only up to the Munich Agreement of 1938. He, however, rejected Hitler’s planned path to war from 1939 onward. Consistently, after 1938 he avoided any commendation of National Socialist foreign policy in his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*. In 1946, looking back, he wrote in a tone of resignation: *“Vom Herbst 1938 ab vollzog sich der Leidensweg der deutschen Geopolitik (...) unter dem Druck der Alleinherrschaft einer Partei bis zu Missbrauch und Missverstehen durch staatliche Stellen (...). Geopolitik als geographisches Gewissen des Staates (...) hätte z.B. 1938 geboten, sich dankbar mit dem in München Erreichten zu begnügen”* [Haushofer, 1946, p. 26].

As a negation of all the principles of German geopolitics, he condemned in 1941 the preparations for war against the Soviet Union: *“Dass man Eurasien nicht, einkreisen’ kann, wenn sich seine zwei größten, zusammen raumstärksten Völker nicht, wie etwa im Krimkrieg oder 1914, gegeneinander ausspielen lassen, (...) das ist ein zweites Axiom europäischer Politik von der Geopolitik her”* [Haushofer, 1941, p. 33].

Haushofer’s geopolitical vision consisted of a Eurasian coalition of Germany, the USSR and Japan against the Anglo-US coalition. The Eurasian controversy between Haushofer and his colleague Erich Obst has been thoroughly researched by the US historian Jörg Michael Dostal³.

Before Carl Schmitt, in 1941, advocated for the creation of a spatially autonomous international law as a framework for a Großraumordnung, his colleague Manfred Langhans-Ratzeburg had

already introduced the term “geojurisprudence” into the discussion [Langhans-Ratzeburg, 1928, p. 77].

Carl Schmitt: *“Wir denken heute planetarisch und in Großräumen. Wir erkennen die Unabwendbarkeit kommender Raumplanungen (...) In dieser Lage besteht die Aufgabe der deutschen Völkerrechtswissenschaft darin (...), den Begriff einer konkreten Großraumordnung zu finden (...) Das kann für uns nur der völkerrechtliche Begriff des Reiches sein als einer von bestimmten weltanschaulichen Ideen und Prinzipien beherrschten Großraumordnung, die Interventionen raumfremder Mächte ausschließt und deren Garant und Hüter ein Volk ist, das sich dieser Aufgabe gewachsen zeigt”*⁴.

For his legal colleague Küchenhoff, this implied an ethnonational law within the Großraum concept: *“Das Führungsvolk bestimmt nun den Raum, auf dem seine Führung gelten soll, als sachliches Substrat seiner selbst und der von ihm geführten Völker”*⁵.

Years before his seizure of power in 1933, the dictator Adolf Hitler dogmatically postulated the expansion of Lebensraum as an expansionist, colonial conquest of territory in “Mein Kampf” (1924–1926). In this political-programmatic book he did not use the term geopolitics at all, but generally spoke only of Lebensraum, racial struggle (Rassenkampf), a “people without space” (Volk ohne Raum), or spatial order (Raumordnung). Whether Hitler read Ratzel’s works, such as *Der Lebensraum* or *Politische Geographie*, during his thirteen-month moderate imprisonment in Landsberg (1923–1924) is unknown. There is also no evidence that he adopted any geopolitical concepts from Haushofer, who discussed geopolitics with him multiple times in Landsberg prison via his former assistant, Rudolf Hess. This rejection likely stems from the fact that National Socialist ideology strictly opposed determinism and materialism as constitutive elements of geopolitics. Hitler’s conception of spatial expansion and the accumulation of power was continental in orientation. The other, maritime-oriented German geopolitical school, with its renewed focus on colonial acquisition, was marginalized in National Socialist thought. In his campaigns against Poland and the USSR, racial considerations, framed as a supposed historical mandate, dominated over spatial strategy in his “Lebensraum”-fantasies.

¹Ratzel, F. *Der Lebensraum*, 69–70.

²Ebeling, F. *Karl Haushofer und seine Raumwissenschaft 1919–1945*. <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/geopolitik-karl-haushofer-und-seine-raumwissenschaft-19191945-reprint-2018nbsped-9783050069678-9783050024691.html> (date of access: 25.11.2025). See also: Jacobsen, H. A. *Karl Haushofer, Leben und Werk* 2 Bd.

³Dostal, J. (2016). *Die Eurasien-Debatte der Zeitschrift für Geopolitik (1924–1932)*. <https://d-nb.info/119219828X/34> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁴Schmitt, C. (1941). *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung*.

⁵Küchenhoff, G. (1944). *Großraumgedanke und völkische Idee im Recht*. https://www.zaoerv.de/12_1944/12_1944_1_a_34_82.pdf (date of access: 25.11.2025).

THE INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED US GEOSTRATEGISTS AND GEOPOLITICS SCHOLARS MAHAN, MACKINDER AND SPYKMAN¹

Even before Kjellén and Ratzel addressed the problematics of political geography and geopolitics in scholarly publications, the US Admiral and geostrategist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) had already examined the effective interplay of power and strategy on a global scale in two publications (1890² and 1900³), emphasizing that historically, world powers had always been naval powers. The term geopolitics was still unknown to him; Kjellén had only coined it in 1899.

A few years later, the British geographer and political economist Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) developed the geopolitical-strategic pivot area / Heartland theory [Mackinder 1904, pp. 421–437]. His analytical category was not explicitly geopolitics but political geography. In doing so, he challenged Mahan's dogmatic historical assertion of naval power dominance: land powers, too, could overcome naval powers through the conquest of strategic bases. At the center of his conceptual "World Island", comprising Africa, Europe and Asia, he located the Heartland, which corresponded precisely to the then-Zarist Russian Empire. Owing to effectively developed transport infrastructure combined with advanced economic and industrial development, a state could by controlling the Heartland and exercising political dominance over the Rimland as a buffer between the Heartland and maritime powers, ultimately achieve control over the World Island: "*The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of the vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight. This might happen if Germany were to ally herself with Russia*"⁴.

¹The fundamental concepts of the three geopoliticians: Theories of Geopolitics. <https://dokumen.pub/qdownload/theories-of-geopolitics.html> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

²Geostrategy focuses on geofactors such as territory, positional relationships, and military capabilities to advance one's own objectives. Geostrategy is defined as "the systematic realization of strategic and security-political goals, taking into account geopolitically determined regional and global conditions". Wolfgang Baumann, Geopolitik- ein zeitgemäßer Beitrag zum gesamtstaatlichen Führungsverfahren? https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf/publikationen/09_vu1_01_gbf.pdf (date of access: 25.11.2025).

³Mahan, A. (1890). The influence of sea power upon history. <https://dn790003.ca.archive.org/0/items/seanpowerinf00maha/seanpowerinf00maha.pdf> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁴Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The Geographical Pivot of History. https://disp.web.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/Mackinder_Geographical+Pivot+of+History.pdf (date of access: 25.11.2025).

In his 1919 publication "Democratic Ideals and Reality", he introduced his now-famous three-tiered 'three-tiered ladder': "*Who rules Eastern Europa commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island. Who rules the World Island commands the world*"⁵.

Haushofer incorporated Mackinder's Heartland theory into his work: "*Haushofers Idee eines Kontinentalblocks, bestehen aus Deutschland, Italien, der Sowjetunion und Japan, sah die pivot area im Zentrum eines Machtblocks, der unter deutscher Führung zum Gegengewicht zur britischen Großmacht werden sollte*"⁶. The Dutch-American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman (1893–1943) in two geostrategic publications in 1942 and 1944⁷, advocated a robust US foreign policy aimed at containing Russian power in Europe. The term he used in his publications is geopolitics. As a co-founder of the political science Realist school, he is regarded as one of the intellectual precursors of John Foster Dulles' later US containment policy during the Cold War. Unlike Mackinder, he was unconcerned with the prospect of the Russian Heartland achieving infrastructural unity in the foreseeable future as a potential power rival to the US naval forces. On the global stage, the primary concern was not the attempted dominance of the Heartland by maritime powers, but rather who controlled the Rimland – comprising quasi-amphibious states with their populations, industries, and resources – that the centers of power lie, serving as a master key to global influence through their control of access to both the Heartland and the maritime powers.

He therefore modified Mackinder's three-tiered geostrategic theory into: "*Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world*"⁸.

In the East-West conflict the Soviet Union followed Mackinder by industrializing its

pdf (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁵Mackinder, H. J. (1919) Democratic Ideals and Realit. URL: <https://archive.org/details/democraticideals00mackiala/page/194/mode/2up?view=theater> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁶Themenportal Europäische Geschichte. (2025, August 26). Drei Karten globaler Raumordnung auf Grundlage der Heartland-Theorie (1904 – 1934 –/ 1944). URL: <https://www.europa.clio-online.de/quelle/id/q63-78139> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁷Spykman, N. J. (1942). America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.5673/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

See also: Spykman, N. J. (1944). The Geography of the Peace. <https://de.scribd.com/document/855429528/The-Geography-of-the-https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.5673/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁸Spykman, N. J. (1944). The Geography of the Peace, 43.

Heartland and exercising military control over the geographically adjacent Rimland / Eastern Europe. The United States, by contrast, pursued a Mackinder-Spykman synthesis, seeking to contain the Heartland militarily through its Western European NATO Rimland.

As with all scientific theories, geopolitical theory has evolved over time. Today, geopolitics is largely understood as an interdisciplinary field drawing on geography, history, sociology and political science, which examines how essential factors such as geographic location, topography, resources and climate influence political processes, power relations and, ultimately, the strategic decisions of states.

Among the most prominent contemporary US geopoliticians are former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) [Kissinger, 2003; Kissinger, 2014] and former US President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928–2017) [Brzezinski, 1997]. At the center of Kissinger's geopolitical reflections and considerations is the pursuit of a power-based balance-of-interests approach as a principle of world order. For him, it is not geographical space per se that constitutes a geopolitical driving force sui generis, but the territorial state. Brzezinski's understanding of geopolitics, by contrast, aligns with the intellectual tradition of Halford Mackinder. From the disciplines of history and political science, the British historian Paul Kennedy, who teaches at Yale, serves as a representative example [Kennedy, 1987]. For Kennedy, geopolitics encompasses not only the interaction of territory and power, but in an expanded sense also factors such as industrial capacity, financial systems, demography, technological innovation, migration, and climate.

His younger colleague, Alfred W. McCoy, whose research focuses on Southeast Asia, assessed the highly charged geopolitical conflict in 2022 between the United States and China as the culminating phase of the historical struggle for control of Eurasia / the Heartland between maritime and continental powers¹.

PART 2: POWER DISTRIBUTION, SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS AS CENTRAL CATEGORIES OF STRUCTURAL NEO-REALISM

Kenneth Waltz is the founder of the political science theory of neorealism². The central assumption of

neorealists is that the international order is characterized by anarchy: "States continue to coexist in an anarchic order. Self-help is the principle of action in such an order, and the most important way in which states must help themselves is by providing for their own security"³. Within the framework of a means-end-rationality, states pursue the enforcement of their own interests as their highest principle / rational units.

Power distribution – especially in the form of military resources – and security are central categories of structural neorealism.

Geopolitics has a mediating effect on the distribution of power in the international state system. Because the geographical conditions influence the security situation and options for action. The following factors are important in this regard: A state's strategic location and position of power are influenced by whether it is an island power or a continental power? Whether there are buffer zones between it and other states. How vulnerable is the state geographically? How is access to resources and trade routes secured?

SPACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new states, political geography also changed for Germany, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Central Europe briefly became a conceptual political reference [Baumann, 2000]. A new spatial thinking also returned to Germany. Naturally, until then, all political action had been linked to space in some way. Cultural, social, or family policies, for example, carry an abstractly connoted relationship to spaces of interaction and care, whereas foreign, regional, or trade policy decisions refer to geographic spaces of exchange, competition, and innovation.

The spatial turn after 1945 initiated a second paradigm shift in the social and cultural sciences. According to proponents of the spatial turn [Döring, Thielmann, 2008; Günzel, 2009]⁴ space is no longer seen as a determinant to which all else is subordinated.

The new understanding of space is based on an implicit spatial conception according to which *"dass der (physische) Raum erst in der sozialen und kulturellen Praxis, im menschlichen Denken, Sprechen*

¹McCoy, A. W. (2025, August 29). Russland, China und der Feind, Le Monde Diplomatique. <https://monde-diplomatique.de/artikel/15844140> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

²Waltz. Theory of International Politics. https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile.php/486328/mod_resource/content/0/Kenneth%20N.%20Waltz%20

Theory%20of%20International%20Politics%20Addison-Wesley%20series%20in%20political%20science%20%20%20%201979.pdf (date of access: 25.11.2025).

³Waltz. The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory. <https://users.metu.edu.tr/utuba/Waltz.pdf> p. 624 (date of access: 25.11.2025).

⁴Kibel, J., Meier, N., Steets, S., Weidenhaus, G. (2025, September 2). Figuring Out Spaces. <https://www.transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/a3/c0/69/oa9783839475041.pdf>. (date of access 25.11.2025).

*und Handeln, geformt wird*¹. In this perspective, spaces are socially constructed and emerge through active processes. They acquire meaning only within the political context of actions, power relations, symbols, and so forth, thereby shaping societal processes. Accordingly, territorial boundaries, for example, are not merely markings on maps but are the outcomes of political negotiation or prevailing power structures. However, social constructivism as a theory was developed by the two US-sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann as early as 1966². As a continuation of basic social constructivist assumptions, political constructivism developed as a political theory in the late 1980s. The US political scientist Nicholas Onuf developed important approaches to political constructivism as a political theory [Onuf, 1989]. The German-US political scientist Alexander Wendt established it as a “grand theory” in 1999³.

The spatial turn critiques classical geopolitics for its worldview of space as a given strategic interest and a determinant of foreign policy imperatives. By treating political action as geographically conditioned, interests, as drivers of policy, are reduced to perceived, competing spatial images.

Political discourses, however, develop within contexts and controversies shaped by specific socio-political, economic, historical, and ideational constellations. The interpretive frameworks anchored in these contexts are constructs that incorporate historical experiences, perceptions, interests, norms and values, fundamental beliefs or positions, and cultural identities, thereby shaping cognitive maps or mental models. Space, distance, territory, and resources, as determinants of geopolitics, do not possess strategic objectivity *eo ipso*. They acquire meaning only through political attribution and linkage to interests, and through their declaration and justification, they also gain ideological substance.

In summary, and by way of example, the statement of the Berlin-based Eastern European historian and prominent advocate of the spatial turn, Karl Schlögel: “*Mittlerweile ist die Geopolitik zum allround Erklärungsmodell geworden, so als leitete sich alles Geschehen allein aus Raumverhältnissen ab. Aber die Geographie, die an die Stelle der Systeme trat, kann das Agieren von Gesellschaften, Staaten, Diktatoren nicht wirklich erklären, und es ist längst Zeit, die Erforschung der Komplexität von Gesellschaftssystemen wieder in ihre Rechte einzusetzen. Kurz: Wenn man die inneren Dynamiken von Staatswesen erklären will, aus denen sich auch die internationalen Beziehungen ableiten, dann braucht es wieder mehr Soziologie und Ökonomie, mehr Systemanalyse und Mentalitätsgeschichte statt des leer gewordenen Verweises auf die Geographie*” [Schlögel, 2022].

GEO-ECONOMICS

The grammar of self-understanding in “old school” geopolitics is territorially oriented, typically involving influence or hegemonic power projection implemented ‘*manu militari*’. However, following the end of the East-West conflict, economics has gained a driving and propulsive force in interest-driven politics, due to the growing economic orientation of international relations and globalization. Does this, however, also signify a paradigm shift from geopolitics to geo-economics? This question has been the subject of a controversial debate for years [Bergsten, 1992; Blyth, 2002].

Notably, geo-economics does not signify soft power through integrative economic and trade cooperation. Rather, geo-economics denotes the use of supply chain controls, embargoes, tariffs, sanctions and credit-financed infrastructure projects, that is the deployment of economic means under a geopolitical guise to advance political and strategic objectives. In this understanding, the influential conservative US political scientist Robert Kagan argued as early as 2008 that economic power is an instrument, “*nicht um den geopolitischen Kampf aufzugeben, sondern um ihn erfolgreicher führen zu können*” [Kagan, 2008]. Geopolitics and geo-economics must therefore be understood as interdependent rather than alternative frameworks.

¹Langthaler, E. (2025, September 3) Orte in Beziehung. <https://www.ruralhistory.at/de/publikationen/rhwp/RHWP16.pdf>. (date of access 25.11.2025).

²Berger, P., Luckmann, T. The Social Construction of Reality. <https://amstudugm.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/social-construction-of-reality.pdf> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

³Wendt, A., Social Theorie of International Politics. <https://www.guillaumenaicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Wendt-Social-Theory-of-International-Politics.pdf> (date of access: 25.11.2025).

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