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BRIESEWITZ G., 2014

Raum und Nation in der polnischen Westforschung 1918-1948

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Reviewed by Kazimierz Wóycicki

The Centre for East European Studies
University of Warsaw
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warsaw: Poland
e-mail: kazwoy@gmail.com
European Academy Krzyżowa
Krzyżowa 7, 58-112 Grodziszczce: Poland

The war of the geographers. A political scientist's remarks

That Polish 'Western thought' emerged in response to German *Ostforschung* is a main thesis of this very extensive work by Gernot Briesewitz. In it there is also a strong signal that this kind of context cannot to even the slightest extent relativise or justify the entanglement of German *Ostforschung* in the National Socialism of the Third Reich.

The author offers a penetrating analysis of the evolution of Polish Western thought, showing how it reacted to a changing political situation as one stage following Poland's regaining of independence in 1918 followed another, through the inter-War period and then the Second World War, up until the time the communist authorities came to power.

The author does not explain this last hiatus in any more incisive or clear-cut way, but would seem to link it to the advent of the 'Stalinisation' process. In a fundamental sense, Briesewitz's work encompasses a longer period than the years 1918-1948, given that work by Waław Nałkowski and Eugeniusz Romer from before the First World War is also referred to, with the mass of footnotes furthermore allowing the history of Western thought after 1948 to be traced. The book thus offers an interesting lecture on the history of concepts, not only from Polish political geography, but also from broader territory-related musings of Polish political thought.

Briesewitz regards the territory and space that geography makes reference to as a creation of the cultural imagination – in the same

way that Anderson writes of the 'imagined past', or else in line with the way the related concept of 'mental space' is made use of. This ensures that it is with some considerable distance that one looks upon political geography, where this seeks to use assumptions regarding objective factors to find affinities between a given territory and a given political community. This is also why the author reserves the harshest possible judgment for the German political geography of the Second and Third Reichs, also emphasising just how far-reaching its construing of anti-Polish stereotypes was.

Briesewitz thus notes a fundamental difference between Polish and German discourse in political geography prior to the First World War. In Germany, a highly-institutionalised political geography made manifest the state's imperial ambitions, raising the issue of living space and the possibility of expansion (with this in time becoming a political project for aggression). In the meantime, in the Polish case, there was the discourse of the nation-building movement, seeking to regain and rebuild its state, while keeping the image of the old, pre-Partition Republic in the background. After more than a century of statelessness and huge ethnic and civilisational changes taking place in the area, any reconciling of the historical map with contemporary realities represented a difficult problem indeed. It created a specific linkage between the Polish political geography that was taking shape and a geography of a symbolic and historical nature. And, as we know, the matter of the territory the re-emerging Polish state ought to occupy was a source of considerable controversy and debate domestically, around 1918.

The dispute between the aforesaid Nałkowski and Romer is looked at, as one of the most important discussions concerning the territory and location of Poland prior to its regaining of independence. The work by these leading Polish geographers is here placed in the context of intellectual dispute characterising the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the creative output

of Friedrich Ratzel, who is widely regarded as a main founder of political geography as an academic discipline. This figure from German geography arouses lively argument to this day, in regard to the degree to which the concept he gave rise to (of *Lebensraum*) was or was not a co-founder of the later Nazi ideology. Naturally the dispute revolves around whether these concepts had content from the outset developed by the ideologists of National Socialism, e.g. such geographers as Karl Kaushoffer, who became entirely caught up in fully-fledged Nazism, and was a direct heir of the Ratzel tradition.

In fact, terminology used by Nałkowski and Romer (creature of nature, vital organism) do display similarities to, and kinship with, the terminology of Ratzel. Thus, if Polish geographers make use of terms of this kind, it is reasonable to assess the terminology deployed by the German geographer as belonging more with the epoch in which it was created, and needing to be interpreted in that context first and foremost. In this understanding, the 'degeneration' that took place was something that happened after.

The period of the Second Republic of Poland saw, not so much any easing of the controversy involving Polish and German geographers, as a marked strengthening of it. German political geography in the hands of such exponents as Hausdorff radicalised the anti-Polish argumentation, and this – via the territorial revisionism of the Weimar Republic – gave rise to the criminal policy of the Third Reich. The Second Republic was thus confronted with revisionist tendencies on the German side, as well as with dissatisfaction with the results of the 1920 referendum on the Polish side.

A Jagiellonian-Piast concept then arose, positing a temporal and spatial continuum from the origins of the Polish state through to the present day. Historical argument here links up with geographical, and Briesewitz is inclined to consider that the attention of Polish political geography was first and foremost directed at East Prussia and the Baltic Sea (the matter of the widening of the

Polish corridor). What was involved was a 'geostrategic' improvement of the state's location, more than any ethnic arguments, or even historical ones. To that extent, Lower Silesia and Western Pomerania were not the centre of attention for the Jagiellonian-Piast concept, with Polish political thought dominated by a Jagiellonian-type thinking orientated towards the East. However, 'Western thought' was awakened by the revisionist tendencies in the Weimar Republic. Eugeniusz Romer's concept of the 'natural territory' – with a western border along the Oder and Neisse – found its continuation in work by Zygmunt Wojciechowski, in which the question of a border coinciding with these rivers was brought into far sharper relief.

In the circumstances of the Second World War, Western thought experienced an understandable-enough radicalisation, to the point where it would supply justifications, post-War, for a border along the Oder and Neisse, in this way merging with the communist concept of the 'Recovered Territories' (*Ziemie Odzyskane*). The tragic paradox of this story is that effect was given to the Western thought characteristic of the Second Republic in tandem with the catastrophe of the Second World War. Poland did indeed obtain a border along the Oder and Neisse, because that was the will of Stalin, who was at the same time stifling Polish independence. Academics like Zygmunt Wojciechowski thus saw their ideas written into a post-War concept of Piast Poland that legitimised the country's new authorities. They salvaged what was left of the Jagiellonian-Piast idea, facing up to the threat that Poland might end up being reduced to an area smaller than the old Congress Kingdom, given the efforts made to fully discredit the Jagiellonian part of the above idea.

Understandably enough, Western thought immediately after the War had a very anti-German orientation, and was thus a useful prop for the policy towards Germany being pursued by the communist authorities. This was the case through to 1989, notwithstanding the way increasing amounts of time

separating the present from the Second World War led to the emergence of new ideas and political needs. The Western Institute and Silesian Institute as institutional supports helped out via a battle against 'West German' revisionism, and with circles of resettled (or exiled) Germans in particular. They also upheld a thesis regarding the age-old Piast character of the Western Lands, and this was one of the reasons why the process of building a Polish identity there (whose key factor with time became the recognition of the German heritage and its repossession) eluded most of the later proponents of 'Western thought' in the People's Republic of Poland. These continued all the time in a confrontational atmosphere vis-à-vis Germany, where in the meantime the years from the 1970s onwards brought many observable manifestations of Polish-German rapprochement. The two centres thus remained on the sidelines of processes that led to Polish-German reconciliation from 1989 onwards.

In the context of the Polish-German dispute between geographers, 'Western thought' may be interpreted more as a component of political discourse than as a scientific quarrel within the discipline that is geography. With the arrival of 1989, 'Western thought' was left entirely outdated by ever-closer relations between Warsaw and Berlin, with this making clearer than ever the extent to which ostensibly geographical and certainly territorial imaginings had earlier become fixed in a purely propaganda context. However, even in the face of such a critical assessment, it is necessary to recall how far on from 1945 'Western thought' found its political justification in the face of a shift of territory forced upon Poland that was a rare event on such a scale anywhere and at any time in history.

If there is indeed justification for the thesis that 'Western thought' was relegated to history by the events of 1989, as opposed to being any longer a matter of relevant political (or policy) discourse, this may still leave open a question as to how the 'imagined space' of today's Poland as an EU Member State is constructed, and what that construction

has in common with imaginings to the fore in earlier times.

A reading of the work by Briesewitz also ushers in a second, more general, question – concerning the significance and role to be played in political processes by political geography, as well as the spatial imaginings and ideas that can find themselves being generated within that discipline. To what extent do the ideas of geographers end up influencing politics (or policy)? To what extent are they nothing more than *ex post* justifications allowing matters to be resolved or to take their course with the aid of ‘geographical arguments’? These are of course questions relating to a further one about the relationship between the political sciences and geography. Briesewitz is inclined to regard resort to geography as a means of advancing political arguments as an abuse of science, pure and simple – even if the context of the era in which Ratzel, Nałkowski or Romer were active was one in which this kind of approach was widespread, and considered justified.

The pre-First World War period is one of nation-founding movements within the area ruled over by European empires like the Second Reich and Tsarist Russia. Nations having the ambition to found their own states were faced with an imperative to determine their borders. Briesewitz’s book throws this fact into sharp relief, and in an interesting way. At the same time, and in parallel, we see the first fruits of the political sciences ripen, with a major manifestation thereof being the birth of geopolitics. A late 19th-century atmosphere in which scientism held sway saw a geopolitics (with pretensions to be a field with objectivised rooting in science almost matching that of the natural sciences) reach out for geography and Darwinism. Thus were spatial relations, like configurations of mountain chains, lowlands and rivers, and even climatic conditions, roped in to create conditions pretty much allowed to determine political relationships. Thus did geopolitics find itself in a rather ambiguous situation from the very outset, with its geographical arguments in general being deployed to explain

and justify what had happened; and with the geographer wading in alongside the historian to add his contribution, to the effect that what the latter knew to be true about history just had to happen, given that it was all decided by geography.

Things complicated further as geopolitics opted to refer to the future as well as the past. Then geographical conditions were to delimit areas that were just ‘natural’ for and to given political communities – to the extent that, if the latter did not in fact occupy the former at the given moment, then the former situation needed to be reinstated. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, argumentation of this kind was linked up with an absolutist approach to ethnic divisions, and hence with fundamentally racist ideologies. Nothing surprising then, as Brusewitz notes, that some of the founders of geopolitics so willingly become bedfellows with the National Socialists.

While ostensibly supplying objectivised criteria by which to depict political space, geography found itself at the beck and call of politics and politicians that were seeking to shape political space actively. In such a way did political wilfulness and even aggression obtain sanction by reference to natural objectivity.

The post-War period in essence brought a complete ditching of the version of ‘geopolitics’ that had shaped the turn of the century. This *inter alia* happened because of the way in which (and extent to which) it had become compromised given the deployment of its key tenets in support of Third Reich ideology.

Nevertheless, the Polish-German disputes between geographers did not die away, and in fact persisted for many years after the War, as a consequence of the huge post-War shifts in territory that had taken place, and the fact that people in Poland had no choice whatever but to speak up for changes that long proved unacceptable to Germany, for obvious enough reasons. It is true to say that this dispute continued to draw heavily on arguments from a much earlier era. But the Polish-German war of the geographers

ceased to mean anything rather quickly after 1989, and so faded away. It might thus have seemed that geography had ceased to play any propaganda role at all, at least in Europe.

Nevertheless, it is ever necessary to recall how great a significance a map may have, and how much persuasive power. What is more, the associate mental maps are by no means just the work of geographers. Depictions from the past still visible on old maps are a suggestive heritage that can come back to life even several generations later, should the circumstances prove favourable. In Poland too, territorial imaginings bade farewell to long ago seem to have made rather a return: not least *Międzymorze* (the *Intermarium* between the Baltic and Black Seas), as a concept inherited from earlier disputes. For Poles, this is an echo of territorial imaginings associated with the old Commonwealth, while for Hungarians such a map lies at the heart of discussions on national identity.

Today's migrations of nations and attendant processes are also impossible to discuss without a map, while a further grim example of the use of maps – and hence of imagined mental space given concrete form and geopolitical resonance – of course relates to Putin's

Russia. Maps made by such supportive propaganda merchants as Aleksandr Dugin offer an effective illustration of what Russian neo-imperialism can be capable of imagining, when it comes to the design of a new international order.

Indeed, every more general political debate makes some reference or other to a map. There is also obvious linkage between the political sciences and geography in many of its scientific variants. It is certain that the boundaries between these fields are fuzzy, and hasty or thoughtless transgressions of them may make geography a tool of politics once again, with political scientists afforded the chance to use the prompts provided to offer simplified explanations of political processes. A reminder regarding earlier discussions of this kind might thus prove useful, not only because of a need to safeguard the rules of our scientific discipline. Excessively blasé movements of fingers around maps may end in wars far beyond those waged between geographers, and this is one more reason why a read of Briesewitz's book looks beneficial. It would thus be fine if it were to appear in a Polish version.