Drawing Fatherlands
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Geographers and Borders in Inter-war Europe

by

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Introduction

In early 2015, during a casual conversation with Peter Haslinger – a renowned specialist in the political history of geography – I mentioned the idea of a work about Albrecht Penck’s students from Central and Eastern Europe. As I explained it, the work would open with a very general description of a cohort of young, talented, and exceedingly ambitious people fascinated by the modernity of German-language geographical sciences. Then, after the outbreak of World War I, they became witnesses – occasionally, accomplices – and, at times, undeclared opponents – of the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation of Central and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, their former professors (Albrecht Penck among them) enthusiastically supported the “moral conquest” of the region. They explored, studied, and described it from the perspective of colonisers conquering a new, wild land. Another plot twist arrived at the turn of 1918, when some of Penck’s students became leading experts in the service of their nation-states, offering substantial aid in the struggle for the most favourable borders possible at the Paris Peace Conference. At the same time, some engaged in open conflict with their German and Austrian colleagues who defended the territorial integrity of their countries. In this dispute, Penck occupied one side of the barricade, while some of his former students found themselves on the other. What followed was the laborious effort to reestablish relations, to bridge the divide between geographers from Germany and their newly-emancipated colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe. However, friendships of the past were never restored; a “cold war” between nationalist geographers continued throughout the interwar period. And then the “hot” war came.

“Oh,” my learned interlocutor retorted, “so you’re angling for a psychoanalytical story of a parricide?” At first I bristled, because I had not even considered a Freudian analysis of the relations between the protagonists of my – then still hypothetical – book at the time. My reaction now would likely be calmer. There was much to Peter Haslinger’s remark. The history of geographical sciences at the interface between Germany and its eastern neighbours is indeed rich in material for a psychoanalyst, but this is only one of several perspectives that can be applied to it. Apart from the symbolic parricide (to maintain the gaudy metaphor), other plot-lines in the story deserve equal attention – such as the scientific arguments inspired by the (then) latest trends in geography which the protagonists of this book used to justify the territorial claims of their delegations; or the impact the emancipation of the “parricides” in the interwar period had, that is, the wide opening to international contacts, established
and maintained without the involvement of Germans and Austrians. Some of the students outgrew their masters, earning for themselves the status of the most accomplished representatives of their discipline.

Thus, this book combines and mixes various perspectives, its subject the only constant. What it concerns is the connection between modern geography – a science which had experienced a rejuvenation and consistent increase in public recognition during the early twentieth century – and the territorial changes in Central and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe that took place at the same time. Framed in this way, the subject cannot include numerous phenomena that belong to either of the two sets: the history of geography or political history. Only marginal roles are in store for the more and less eminent scholars who did not play a major part in the struggle for the territorial shape of the “new Europe,” as well as a number of politically engaged scholars who ventured into the territory of geography only rarely. The otherwise fascinating history of military cartography, which had advanced by leaps and bounds during World War I, is entirely beyond my field of vision. Focussed on professional geographers, I had precious little time for the popular applications of their ideas in the propaganda of competing nationalist movements. Well-informed readers will probably add something to this list without much difficulty.

Having described what is not in this book, I would now like to mention what I consider to be its most important feature. Not by accident does the title fail to specify which part of Europe the author is dealing with. It is so even as the answer seems obvious: the book concerns Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans; not the Iberian Peninsula, Russia, or Scandinavia. It is the symbolic gesture of a contrarian. Writings about this part of Europe usually focus – understandably so – on modernisation understood as the process of catching up with the more developed West. This approach is largely effective because it has real, material bases. However, there are exceptions to this rule, and of the many branches of history, the history of science is particularly abundant in them. To my mind, given both the significance and long-term effects of the territorial reconstruction in the east and south-east of Europe and the scholarly excellence of the geographers involved in planning that reconstruction, the story told here is more important, more original, and more portentous than others, and it should rightly be viewed as the central tale of the political engagement of geographers in Europe. Their colleagues in other parts of the world would rarely see themselves as co-creators of a new reality – or, to follow the train of thought of the protagonists of this book, as discoverers of the laws of nature determining the right shape of borders. Nowhere else did geographers come to draw their fatherlands.
The author owes a debt of gratitude to people and institutions without whom this book would either never have been written, or the writing would have taken much more time and effort than it did. The idea to expand what was originally conceived as a minor contribution to the history of geography during World War I into a book came from Włodzimierz Mędrzecki, historian and ethnologist, director of the “World War I on Polish Soil: Expectations – experience – consequences” (Pierwsza wojna światowa na ziemiach polskich. Oczekiwania–doświadczenie–konsekwencje) project financed by the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities. Funding from the project allowed me the freedom to choose the queries and conferences that I thought indispensable to press on with the book. Two academic institutions that hosted me between 2014 and 2017 provided aid in accessing archival and rare publications: the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena. Special thanks are due to Professor Morgane Labbé and Dr. Vedran Duančić, my excellent guides through the archival remnants of prominent geographers. I will hold dear in memory the kindness shown to me by the staff of the Archiv für Geographie in Leipzig and the Archiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Vienna, both during queries and in resolving issues with the use of illustrations from their repositories in the book.

The Imre Kertész Kolleg proved an ideal place to organise and set all of the material in logical order. This was helped by inspiring discussions with colleagues from various countries who expressed their interest – sincerely or not, but in a very convincing fashion – in the topic I was working on. Special thanks are due to student assistants who not only endured without complaint hours of scanning the maps and tables I needed for my work, but also were prepared to occasionally listen to the somewhat understructured tales of geographers and geography. Without their help, the work on the book would have been not only more toilsome, but also much less enjoyable. Along the way from an idea to the finished product, some of the claims made in the book were discussed at conferences and seminars I took part in. I will not mention by name the participants in these discussions, but I remember their influence on my thinking. In the latter respect, three other people deserve the most credit: firstly, the aforementioned Morgane Labbé, whose intelligent and profound remarks overturned some of the author’s overly hasty judgments; secondly, Guido Hausmann, who has been showing for years that it is not the folly, but the wisdom of the works of old geographers that most deserves our attention; and finally, Maciej Janowski, a true master of questions as pertinent as they are...
uncomfortable. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Justyna Górny, the first and harshest reviewer of this work.

The English edition of the book gives me the opportunity to expand the introduction by adding a few details and apply certain changes to the text. The latter are inspired by the dynamic development of research into the history of geography. Several important studies in the field appeared in recent years (but after the publication of the Polish original of Drawing Fatherlands), most prominently books by Vedran Duančić and Steven Seegel. References to these works allowed me to supplement the narrative in a number of places. The final shape of the book is also influenced by its reviewers (among whom I would like to mention Agnes Laba and Tomasz Pudłocki, in particular) and the participants in the discussions devoted to it. Finally, my appreciation and gratitude goes to the unfailing translator (and occasional editor), Antoni Górny.

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