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Peace-Making and Geography after the First World War

Abstract

During the First World War, and later, geographers from East Central and South-Eastern Europe formulated several argumentative strategies to support territorial demands. Initially, the predominating idea was the one of ethnic borders, which were an expression of the right to self-determination as well as the most significant correction for strategic and economic justifications. Soon, however, the experts present at the peace conference became convinced that arguments other than ethnic arguments should be used. These arguments contained, among other motifs, culture and civilization. The most active among the experts in this respect were eminent scholars from Poland (e.g. Eugeniusz Romer), Czechoslovakia (e.g. Jan Kapras), Ukraine (Stepan Rudnytsky), Yugoslavia (Jovan Cvijić), Romania (Simion Mehedinți) and Germany (Albrecht Penck, Wilhelm Volz). Most of them continued this line of thinking in the inter-war period, contributing to the creation of their respective national varieties of geopolitics.

Keywords: Paris Peace Conference; borders; East Central Europe; South-Eastern Europe; culture; folklore; ethnicity; civilization

Słowa kluczowe: Konferencja pokojowa w Paryżu; granice; Europa środkowo-wschodnia; Europa południowo-wschodnia; kultura; folklor; etniczność; cywilizacja

The participants in the Paris Peace Conference provided a multiplicity of views on the process of making borders. Initially, following in their footsteps, historians focused on the main political figures both in the global context and within each of the national narratives.¹ In this tradition not only representatives of the

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¹ I.J. Lederer, 1963; E.J. Dillon, 1920; R. Dmowski, 1988; M. Hronský, 1998; M. Pułaski, 1974; C. Seymour, 1960.

great powers but also lower-rank ‘strong leaders’, such as Ion Brătianu, Edvard Beneš or Roman Dmowski get credit for the territorial reconstruction of Europe. The newer research reclaims space for experts who “struggled to come to terms with the dual demands of scientific objectivity on the one hand, and political prerogatives on the other”.² Still, most authors focus on the experts of the victorious powers, largely ignoring the contribution of their colleagues from East Central Europe.³ They are the subject of this study, or, to be more precise, it is their concepts of legitimizing border claims with arguments drawn from culture and civilization.

The process of drawing borders has been an object of scholarly attention for more than a hundred years and abounds in literature.⁴ In the following some light will be shed on two of its less known aspects. First, as indicated above, geographic experts accompanying politicians during, before, and after the Paris Peace Conference (January 1919 to January 1920) will take the place usually occupied by politicians. Their expertise and their political power will stay in focus. Second, the analysis will cover foremost discussions on and in East Central Europe. The source base is primarily built on the scholarly literature and cartographic narratives of the involved scholars and archival and published sources, either from the immediate context of the Peace Conference or echoing its decisions.

The peace-making process was initiated under the auspices of Woodrow Wilson’s concept of self-determination of nations. Translated into the language of geography, this principle elevated ethnic divisions and ethnic cartography over any other type of special argumentation. Yet, though often declared, neither the principle of self-determination, nor attachment to ethnic borders was completely unconditional.⁵ Depending on the situation, geographers of various nationalities would apply far-reaching corrections to this position, even going so far as to completely abandon it for a while. East Central Europe proved to be fertile ground for such concepts, many of which strove to replace the questionable principle of ethnic division with a more flexible combination of cultural factors.⁶

Historical borders: a dead-end strategy

The most obvious alternative to ethnic borders – one well-rooted in European culture – was clearly historical borders. Maps produced during wartime and during peace negotiations often used them, especially when they suited the user. No Czech geographer proved willing to abandon the historical borders of the Crown of St. Wenceslaus, even though ethnic maps unambiguously showed that the territories inhabited by the Czech majority were clearly less

² V. Prött, 2016, p. 8

³ L.E. Gelfand, 1963; N. Smith, 2003; Prött, 2018; M.F. Boemeke and G.D. Feldman, 1998.

⁴ A. Mitrović, 2003, p. 127–136; L.J. Orzell, 1980, p. 49–68; K. Lundgreen-Nielsen, 1979; T. Ter Minassian, 1997, p. 252–286; M. Labbé, 2019, p. 267–359.

⁵ J. Leonhard, (2014), p. 966–968, see also *idem*, (2018), *passim*.

⁶ M. Górný, 2017.

expansive. “The Czechoslovak Republic,” wrote Jan Kapras, a Czech jurist and Czechoslovak linguistic expert, “is in no way a new creation born of the world war and the Paris Congress, but the old Czech state reborn and revived, which had existed in Central Europe for centuries without ever vanishing completely.”⁷ In his wartime atlas, Eugeniusz Romer, a prominent Polish geographer and prime expert of the Polish delegation, used the borders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 1772, even when the data presented on the map in no way justified the practice. Though the structure of large-scale land ownership may have exhibited continuities lasting beyond a hundred years, phenomena such as the industrial population did not appear in Polish territories to any significant extent until after the partitions. Justifying his choice in 1920, Romer wrote that the purely symbolic gesture of returning to pre-partition borders was a simple act of justice. Only with one’s scores settled can one bend to the aspirations of other nations living in the same territory.⁸

The greatest strength of the historical argument – being rooted in tradition – turned into a weakness in the post-war political climate. Emperors and kings fell off thrones one after the other, with some – such as Wilhelm II – exposing not just themselves, but the entire institution of monarchy to ridicule. Conditions did not favor conservative arguments; more advanced approaches were needed to assail the ethnic principle.

Higher civilization

Culture, both high and modern, as well as folk and traditional, became the primary means of correcting such undue attachment to ethnic borders. Romer traced a civilizational border between Russia and Poland tight enough to prevent “all spiritual and cultural exchange.” In his view, whatever remained on the western side belonged to the sphere of Polish culture.⁹ Failed attempts to create an independent Ukraine added momentum to these arguments and helped foster consensus across party lines. According to Irena Pannenkowa, the author of a pamphlet viewed by Romer as the best Polish publication on the situation in Eastern Galicia, “Ruthenians... cannot yet meet the demands that life and cultural-economic requirements put on a modern society.”¹⁰ During the Polish-Ukrainian struggle for Lviv (Lwów), Romer himself engaged in a quantitative comparison of statistical data in the Polish-Ukrainian-German triangle. The implications of the French-language pamphlet he went on to publish in Paris were obvious: while Poles enjoyed great success in their civilizational rivalry against the Germans, with German repressions the only obstacle on the path to advancement, Ukrainians owed their economic and cultural backwardness to themselves alone.¹¹

⁷ J. Kapras, 1920), p. 3.

⁸ E. Romer, 1939, p. 132.

⁹ E. Romer, 1912, p. 44.

¹⁰ I. Pannenkowa, 1919, p. 27.

¹¹ E. Romer, nd.

In Polish publications, the foundations of the cultural arguments – defense against enemies and internal colonization – often coincided with the age-old motif of *antemurale christianitatis*. In its modern iteration, Turks and Tatars were simply replaced with Bolsheviks: after all, as Wincenty Lutosławski noted, both the former and the latter represented a threat to European civilization.¹² The modern twist to the argumentation came from geopolitics, which stipulated that culture-making nations, such as the Polish one, had to expand until they filled their “natural” boundaries, whose final contours were obviously a matter of debate.

Poles were not alone in their pursuit of recognition as a local hegemon. Other pretenders to the title had the benefit of far nearer traditions of cultural domination over neighbouring nations. This cohort included primarily those for whom the war ended in failure or disappointment: Hungarians, Italians, and Germans.

It seemed the most obvious and understandable for the civilizational argument to be invoked in the context of Italian territorial aspirations along the Adriatic coast. Paolo Revelli, for instance, claimed the lands simply belonged to his nation as the sole bearer of civilization within them.¹³ Coming from Hungarian authors, such proclamations required a more extensive justification. Geographers, Pál Teleki in particular, played a major part in devising it.

The idea of maintaining the unity of the lands of the Crown of St. Stephen had been promulgated intensely as early as October 1918. By February 1919, the League for the Protection of Territorial Integrity was established with Teleki at the helm.¹⁴ Maps and statistical comparisons prepared by leading Hungarian geographers proved that the national structure required the maintenance of territorial integrity of Hungary. The collapse of the state, so the argument went, would be followed by the demise of its culture (as the local elites were solely Hungarian) and economy. The Carpathian Basin was presented not only as a unified economic region, but also as a land circumscribed by “natural” boundaries defined by the forces of nature themselves. Nevertheless, demands for territorial readjustment were tempered to a degree – from the restitution of all lost provinces to the return of those with Magyar majorities.¹⁵ Hungarian materials delivered to the Paris conference included many studies that highlighted Hungary’s historical right to an undiminished territory.¹⁶ Magyars were described as the civilizational cement binding the entire country together as the solitary bearers of advanced western-style culture.¹⁷

The notion of a civilizational mission continued to develop where it had blossomed already before the war: in Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia – post-1918 states with numerically strong German minorities – became the object of both indignant tirades and sardonic asides, castigating them for their

¹² W. Lutosławski, 1919), p. 28.

¹³ P. Revelli, 1994, p. 83.

¹⁴ B. Ablonczy, 2006, p. 109; A. Kovács-Bertrand, 1997, p. 45–49.

¹⁵ M. Koźmiński, 1971), p.151–167.

¹⁶ M. Hronský, 1998, p. 239–252.

¹⁷ R. Keményfi, 2010), p. 205.

cultural immaturity. The implacability of the Germans was their actual official position. The 20th Assembly of German Geographers in Leipzig in 1921 passed a solemn edict which proclaimed that “national necessity and duty demand that atlases and maps clearly mark the continuity among territories – including colonies – severed from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. The Assembly declares in favour of admitting for use in schools of every level only those works that meet this condition.”¹⁸

One of the first German geographers who attempted to act upon the idea was Wilhelm Volz. During the early 1920s, he published multiple pamphlets and maps testifying to the superiority of German culture in the disputed areas. Within the German academia, Volz was the most esteemed representative of geographic determinism. He believed that German civilization and the German cultural landscape had the power to assimilate foreign ethnic groups. This accounted for his growing conflict with the likes of Albrecht Penck toward the end of the 1920s: the new times favoured the proponents of “racial” theories, not cultural assimilation. The notion of a combative, but still open German culture, as depicted by Volz, had no place in the Nazi worldview.¹⁹

The methodological groundwork for this current of German revisionist geography was laid by Albrecht Penck. The year 1925 saw the appearance of his article entitled “Deutscher Volks- und Kulturboden” – the former term (*Volksboden*) referred to the German ethnic territory, while the latter (*Kulturboden*) signified the lands that had been visibly shaped by German culture.²⁰ Both the ideas and the specific outline of the civilizational boundary came from Erwin Hanslik, a student of Penck’s – a fact the professor generally left unstated, and his Austrian disciple did not claim his intellectual property.²¹ In the east, the line extended far beyond German settlements; the area was inhabited by Germans alongside members of other nations. In some cases, as with Bohemia and Latvia, the German *Kulturboden* covered the entire country. The definition of what did or did not belong to the sphere of German culture depended to a significant extent on aesthetic criteria:

“Wherever the penetrating influence of the Germans has reached or is reaching, there rules the German Kulturboden. Easy though it may be to distinguish the pure, German villages from the truly destitute Polish ones within Poland, the intense German culture of husbandry and the reliable roads and highways that accompany it stretch as far as the Russian border. There one finds the great boundary of the culture that the German soldiers felt so keenly while marching east. It catches the eye with such force that one can even see it through the window of a train. The townships along the way have fewer and fewer clean brick houses; the fields seem less and less neat; the forests look more and more

¹⁸ Quot. from: H.-P. Brogiato, 1995, p. 70.

¹⁹ U. Jureit, 2012, p. 247–249.

²⁰ A. Penck, 1925.

²¹ N. Henniges, 2015.

dishevelled. The same was observed by those who crossed the eastern border of Prussia into Lithuania.”²²

Penck hoped that his theory would contribute to the formation of national pride among the German youth. The fulfilment of that ambition owed a lot to the energy with which he and his colleagues applied themselves to organizational work. The task of spreading Penck’s conceptions was taken up by a foundation that took its name from Penck’s manifesto (*Deutsche Stiftung für Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung*). With financial backing from the Ministry for Internal Affairs, it organized series of lectures and publications while providing funding for research aimed at discovering and popularizing the German past of East Central Europe. Naturally, one favored topic was the islands of German colonization beyond the borders of the country drawn at Versailles.²³

The emerging structures of the German *Ostforschung* thus joined their mirror image on the Polish side in a deadly embrace during the interwar period. Publication for publication, lecture for lecture, institute for institute – this struggle continued until the outbreak of the next war. The contacts between Poles and Germans involved in these scholarly pursuits are not a wholly unfamiliar subject in historiography. Thus far, the attempts to address it focused on comparing the German *Ostforschung* with Polish interwar studies on the western territories.²⁴ The most consistent of these comparisons was advanced by Markus Krzoska, who identified commonalities between the two research currents, such as their political activism, consonant with the questioning of scientific objectivism; interdisciplinary proclivities, particularly cooperation between historians, geographers, archaeologists, and linguists; efficient pursuit of institutionalization; and the mutual fascination with the achievements of counterparts from the other side of the border. The relationship was far from equal: it was the Poles for the most part who adopted German trends and organizational solutions. While rhetorical appeals to “the German model” in other European countries and the US did not involve its direct application, Poles followed the German example in terms of organization, as well as in certain aspects of methodology and ideology, without openly admitting it.²⁵

²² “Aber soweit die Durchdringung mit Deutschen reichte oder reicht, herrscht deutscher Kulturboden. Zwar konnte man unschwer in Polen die sauberen deutschen von den oft recht dürftigen polnischen Dörfern unterscheiden; aber die intensive deutsche Bodenkultur und die sie begleitenden guten Wege und Straßen reichten bis zur russischen Grenze. Hier war die große Kulturgrenze, die die deutschen Soldaten nur zu deutlich fühlten, als sie nach Osten marschierten. Sie ist so eindringlich, daß man sie selbst von der Eisenbahn sehen kann. Es hören die schmucken Steinhäuser in den Ortschaften auf. Der Anbau wird weniger sorgfältig, der Wald sichtlich schlecht bewirtschaftet. Dasselbe nahm derjenige gewahr, der die ostpreußische Grenze gegen Litauen überschritt“, A. Penck, 1925, p. 65.

²³ M. Rössler, 1990, p. 51–56; A. Wolff-Powęska, 1979, p. 161–175.

²⁴ See in particular: J.M. Piskorski, J. Hackmann, and R. Jaworski, 2002. For a more recent source, see e.g.: G. Briesewitz, 2014.

²⁵ M. Krzoska, 2003, p. 410.

Polish responses to *Ostforschung* activities for the most part mirrored German theories – and, to a degree, understandably so, since contemporaneous Polish descriptions of the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands were quite similar. In this case, it was the Poles that saw themselves as the creators and bearers of higher culture, the Polish countryside as superior to Ruthenian villages, and found the boundary of Polish influence to be at a similarly long distance beyond the limits of Polish colonization. By extension, however, Polish geographers denied themselves the opportunity to deploy a completely different counterargument, similarly rooted in cultural factors, but drawn from sources distinct from those Penck tapped into. Their approach subscribed to the same system of values their adversaries operated in.

They were not alone in following this path: a similar intellectual perspective was exhibited by Romanian biologist Grigore Antipa, whose wartime publications constantly trumpet the role of the Danube for the Romanian nation, tied to the river by economic and symbolic bonds, through popular song and custom.²⁶ Yet, the claims he laid to the river were not rooted in mysticism or folklore, but rather progress and modernity. In 1915, he wrote that “[t]he advancement of a nation’s culture is best measured by the dedication with which it devotes itself to the broadening of knowledge and the pursuit of precise studies of the fatherland. [...] In this manner, the ties binding the land with the people tighten, and its will to develop a lasting civilization therein gains force.”²⁷

Mystical bonds

One alternative to the civilizational approach can be found in the wartime publications by the three prominent geographers: Emmanuel de Martonne, the French expert to the Peace Conference and best specialist in the geography of Romania; Stepan Rudnytskyi, the foremost Ukrainian geographer soon to be the main engine of this discipline’s institutionalization in Soviet Ukraine; and Jovan Cvijić, the most prominent Serbian and Yugoslav geographer and leading expert of the Serbian delegation, as well as in later works produced under their influence. In 1917, Martonne published a synthesis of his previous studies on the Carpathians, highlighting the peculiarities of their southern part. Not only did these mountains serve as a cradle for the Romanian nation – they also effectively curbed the expansion of Hungarian settlements. According to Martonne, close ties to the mountains meant that processes of assimilation within the Transylvanian region yielded profits for the Romanians, rather than the Hungarians. Aside from the peculiar nature of the geographic region, the phenomenon was shaped by culture:

²⁶ G. Antipa, 1941), p. 42–43 (fragment of a text originally published in Romanian in 1919).

²⁷ „Der beste Masstab für die von einem Volke erreichte Kulturstufe ist die Hingabe, die es für die Kenntnis und das möglichst vertiefte Studium der Heimat an den Tag legt. [...] Hierdurch wird das Band zwischen Land und Volk immer enger gezogen und sein Wille, eine dauernde Civilisation hieselbst zu schaffen, mit Nachdruck bekräftigt.“, G. Antipa, 1915), p. 5.

“No one who has lived with shepherds in the mountains can fail to remark how pastoral life conduces to the preservation of old habits and peculiar customs. This makes it less difficult to understand how the Rumanians could remain a distinct people with a Latin language, while during many centuries wave after wave of barbaric invaders rolled over the plains of the lower Danube.”²⁸

The Frenchman's example was followed by Romanian geographers, especially Simion Mehedinți. The culture-forming powers of the Carpathians remained a favored topic for a long time. In 1929, Mehedinți compared their role to that played by the Nile in the life of Egypt.²⁹ The renowned sociologist Dimitrie Gusti approached the issue from the perspective of ethnography and sociology. In his view, nations that arrived at their contemporary territories at a relatively late time formed under different geographical conditions and thus lacked an intimate connection to the inhabited space. Naturally, this was a dig aimed at the Magyars, who only arrived in the Hungarian Plain in historic times. Yet, Gusti also identified another form of alienation of nations in their territories; in his view, the same effect could occur when a civilization severed the organic ties between the people and the land. Naturally, neither of these misfortunes befell the Romanians: “[t]he Romanians are a Carpathian people, and the Carpathians are a Romanian world. Without that connection, this time essential and organic, between the land and our people, we cannot understand anything from the present history and civilization of the Romanian nation.”³⁰ The cession of a part of Transylvania to Hungary prior to entry into the next World War gave these considerations a new life.³¹

The territorial claims made by Polish geographers received a similar response from Rudnytskyi, who viewed Ukrainians as autochthonous to any territories they inhabited – a sufficient rationale for claims of a special bond between the land and the people. According to him, the historical advances of Polonization were completely insignificant, as proven by the slow movement of the ethnic boundary, whose eastward advance continued at a pace of just over three kilometres per century.³² At the same time, Ukrainians enjoyed the status of pioneers of civilization: “As a result of its geographical location, Cossackdom finds its closest analogues among the famous trappers, adventurers, and pioneers who blazed the trail of European civilization in North America.”³³

Folklore also provided arguments for Cvijić, who saw it as an important element of the psychological types he had been studying in the Balkans, toughly distinguishing the patriarchal and freedom-loving Serbs from deeply Asiatic Bulgarians. In his and his fellow anthropogeographers' ears, Penck's claims rang hollow. For them, aesthetics had no say in defining the cultural hierarchy

²⁸ E. de Martonne, 1917, p. 426.

²⁹ S. Mehedinți, 1937, p. 3.

³⁰ D. Gusti, 2017, p. 19.

³¹ S. Mehedinți, 1936, p. 27.

³² S. Rudnyćkyj, 1916, p. 234.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

of nations. So what if cities and the neatest of villages in Transylvania were inhabited by Germans and Hungarians; so what if their civilization was more advanced than that of the Romanian herders? The latter had heavier, even mystical arrows in their quiver: the bond with the land, the persistence of an archaic culture, the traditions of a people. From this perspective, a tidy garden by a brick house seemed far less appealing than a simple herder's hut.

Conclusion

During the Paris Peace Conference experts within and outside of the official delegations developed sophisticated argumentations in support of their states' territorial claims. Whereas initially ethnic structure dominated, with time other ways of thinking gained prominence. Among them were culture and civilization. Interestingly enough, in the works of the experts culture proved to be a double-edged sword. Some of them identified it with technical progress and high cultural achievements. Others, including prominently some of the best Balkan geographers, responded with a reverse strategy pointing to folk traditions and mystical bonds between the people and the land as deeper and more valid than any act of civilization. This shift in argumentation foreshadowed intellectual developments of the interwar period in general and the rise of geopolitics in particular, as it turned the experts' attention towards such concepts as (geographical) destiny or (national) spirit.

The interwar period failed to bring respite from political activism for the geographers. On the contrary, it was precisely the period when they entered an interdisciplinary discourse that involved representatives of various sciences, including sociology, history, ethnography, and "racial" anthropology.³⁴ The process initiated by the war did not conclude either with the closing of the Paris Peace Conference or afterwards. It continued persistently, a constitutive component of the scholarly experience of the new European states.

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³⁴ C. Cotoi, 2009; G. Briesewitz, 2016; M. Górny, 2019.

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