

Contaminated Science: The Contribution of German Spatial Research to the Genocide of the European Jews

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ABSTRACT

The vast majority of the academic spatial researchers in Nazi Germany participated in the Holocaust and the genocidal “resettlement policy” by providing it with a scientific foundation and an intellectual justification. The Reich Working Group for Spatial Research (RAG), with its departmentalized organizational structure and regionally limited research practices, facilitated the academic support of the policies of extermination. Studies about social and economic problems in certain German regions were closely linked with the recruitment of German “settlers” for the occupied territories in East Central Europe. The spatial researchers thereby both offered academic “solutions” for economically weak areas and aggravated the already disastrous situation in Eastern Europe.

After the war, the same practices of departmentalization offered a convenient path for West German scholars to exonerate themselves in the early years of the Federal Republic. This question about how spatial researchers participated in the murder of European Jews is closely linked with contemporary concepts of social order and the role of planning, ideas which came to influence an entire generation of German scholars and scientists in the mid-twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: spatial research, holocaust, Germany, occupation policy

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1 Introduction

One of the “challenges” in developing an “integrated history of the Holocaust” is “to include the initiatives and reactions of the authorities, institutions, and of the most diverse social groups throughout the occupied and satellite countries of German-controlled Europe.”¹ For Germany itself, this wide question regarding the participation of very different groups in the annihilation of the European Jewry is directed towards a history of the Holocaust not isolated from but as an integral part of the history of German society—an academic project which is still in its early stages. Against this background, in this paper I examine the participation of German scientists in the genocide, concentrating on the spatial sciences, which during the Third Reich were specifically promoted and integrated into the political system.² I focus on both the specific research interests of these scientists as well as their leading ideas about “spaces.”

For nearly four decades, historical inquiries have time and again inquired into the role of German spatial researchers in the genocide of European Jews. Important impulses came initially from disciplines such as sociology—in the form of *Bevölkerungspolitik*—and geography, as well as architecture and city planning—all of which may be grouped under the umbrella heading of spatial sciences. In the mid-1980s, sociologists and historians close to Carsten Klingemann conducted research on the significance and effects of racist stereotypes in the German social sciences of the twentieth century. Werner Durth and Niels Gutschow analyzed the continuities that link the city planning and architecture of the Third Reich with those of the Federal Republic of Germany. Mechthild Rössler highlighted the significant role that German geographic research played in National Socialist *Ostforschung*.³ German historians, however, hardly took note of the research from these individual disciplines, also disregarding Michael Burleigh’s comprehensive and pioneering study *Germany Turns Eastwards*.⁴ Things did not change until Götz Aly and

¹ SAUL FRIEDLÄNDER: An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges, in: CHRISTIAN WIESE, PAUL BETTS (eds.): Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies, London—New York 2010, pp. 21–29, here p. 22.

² ARIANE LEENDERTZ: Ordnung schaffen: Deutsche Raumplanung im 20. Jahrhundert, Göttingen 2008.

³ CARSTEN KLINGEMANN (ed.): Rassenmythos und Sozialwissenschaften in Deutschland: Ein verdrängtes Kapitel sozialwissenschaftlicher Wirkungsgeschichte, Opladen 1987; WERNER DURTH, NIELS GUTSCHOW: Träume in Trümmern: Planungen zum Wiederaufbau zerstörter Städte im Westen Deutschlands 1940–1950, 2 vols., Braunschweig—Wiesbaden 1988; MECHTILD RÖSSLER: “Wissenschaft und Lebensraum”: Geographische Ostforschung im Nationalsozialismus: Ein Beitrag zur Disziplingeschichte der Geographie, Berlin—Hamburg 1990.

⁴ MICHAEL BURLEIGH: Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich, Cambridge—New York 1988.

Susanne Heim initiated a fruitful scholarly debate with their studies on the *Architects of Annihilation*, and this was despite the fact that their provocative thesis of a purely economic rationale for the National Socialist genocide has not been accepted by a majority of historians.⁵

As a consequence of this debate, historians began turning their attention toward academics such as the agricultural scientist Konrad Meyer. Meyer organized the Reich Working Group for Spatial Research (Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung, RAG) in 1935 and directed it until the beginning of the war. In 1939, under Heinrich Himmler's wings, he was in charge of coordinating the General Plan East (Generalplan Ost), the goal of which was the complete destruction of Eastern Europe through a policy of racial "Germanization."⁶

After the war, although Meyer was charged with crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg Military Tribunal trial no. 8 (RuSHA trial), he was merely found guilty for his membership in the SS. Supported by his former co-workers from the RAG and SS, Meyer successfully managed during the trial to describe their involvement in the General Plan East as fundamental research (as opposed to applied research), claiming that it could not have been related to the National Socialist genocide in any way.⁷ Following the trial, Meyer was able to re-establish himself professionally. In 1956, he was appointed to the chair for regional planning and spatial research at the Technical University of Hanover.⁸

In that same year, Meyer also became a regular member of the Academy for Spatial Research and Regional Planning (Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung, ARL), a research institution also located in Hanover. The ARL saw itself as a direct successor of the RAG, which is why it is hardly surprising that, in October 1960, ARL-members celebrated "25 years of Spatial Research." In an anniversary publication prepared on that occasion, the president of the ARL, Karl Heinrich Olsen, emphasized the idea that "neither regional planning, nor spatial research [had] anything to do with National So-

⁵ GÖTZ ALY, SUSANNE HEIM: *Vordenker der Vernichtung: Auschwitz und die deutschen Pläne für eine neue europäische Ordnung*, Hamburg 1991 (English edition: *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, London 2002); for the debate see WOLFGANG SCHNEIDER (ed.): "Vernichtungspolitik": Eine Debatte über den Zusammenhang von Sozialpolitik und Genozid im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland, Hamburg 1991.

⁶ MECHTILD RÖSSLER, SABINE SCHLEIERMACHER (eds.): *Der "Generalplan Ost": Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik*, Berlin 1993.

⁷ ISABEL HEINEMANN: *Rasse, Lebensraum, Genozid: Die nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik im Fokus von Fall 8 der Nürnberger Militärtribunale*, in: KIM C. PRIEMEL, ALEXA STILLER (eds.): *NMT: Die Nürnberger Militärtribunale zwischen Geschichte, Gerechtigkeit und Rechtschöpfung*, Hamburg 2013, pp. 100–126.

⁸ KATRIN HIRTE: *Die deutsche Agrarpolitik und Agrarökonomik: Entstehung und Wandel zweier ambivalenter Disziplinen*, Wiesbaden 2019, pp. 708–712.

cialism.”⁹ This statement was in line with a tendency of West German elites generally and almost unanimously to self-exonerate themselves. One exception to this chorus was the regional planner Martin Pfannschmidt, who demanded an “analysis of the Eastern guilt [Ostschuld].”¹⁰ But within the ARL, this only added to his reputation of being “somewhat difficult to get along with.”¹¹

In this paper, I argue that the spatial researchers of the RAG were, in fact, closely associated with the National Socialist genocide. They provided it with a scientific foundation and justified its subject matter. Doing so, they acted not so much as “architects” or initiators, but stabilized National Socialist rule and supported the policies of extermination by providing “expertise and legitimization.”¹² The RAG’s organizational structure and research practices facilitated the academic support at the time, while, after the war, offering an important basis for the self-exoneration narrative of West German scholars in the early years of the Federal Republic.¹³ In the end, the question regarding the participation of spatial researchers in the murder of European Jews is closely linked with contemporary concepts of social order and the role of planning, ideas which came to influence an entire generation of German scholars and scientists in the middle of the twentieth century.

2 Race and Space

In National Socialism, “race” and “space” were not only complementary concepts reflecting the agriculture policies of Richard Darré, Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture. They were also amalgamated into a specific National Socialist racist spatial concept both in actual settlement policies and in the spatial sciences. A “Manichaeian racial ideology [...] provided the animating force of Hitler’s government.”¹⁴ Pronounced settlement movements since the Kaiserreich had already prior to 1933 been “accompanied by strongly racist

⁹ Raumforschung: 25 Jahre Raumforschung in Deutschland, Bremen 1960.

¹⁰ Typescript of Martin Pfannschmidt: “Raumordnung und Wirtschaftsplanung in den besetzten Gebieten 1940–1944,” 1961-11-18, in: Bundesarchiv Bayreuth, sign. OSTDOK 13/411, p. 10.

¹¹ Karl Haubner (Generalsekretär der ARL) to Günther Franz, 1969-11-05, in: Universitätsarchiv Hohenheim, Nachlass Günther Franz, sign. 8-1-2.

¹² JAN ECKEL: Geist der Zeit: Deutsche Geisteswissenschaften seit 1870, Göttingen 2008, pp. 76–84.

¹³ BERND WEISBROD (ed.): Akademische Vergangenheitspolitik: Beiträge zur Wissenskulturschicht der Nachkriegszeit, Göttingen 2002.

¹⁴ ADAM TOOZE: The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy, London 2006, p. 462.

(and also antisemitic) overtones.”¹⁵ With Adolf Hitler’s seizure of power, the strictly biological, hierarchical racial objectives became the exclusive focus of German settlement policies.¹⁶ Hitler himself set the tone when in early February 1933 he presented the goals of his government and categorically declared that in order to gain *Lebensraum im Osten*, the “Germanization of the population of an annexed or occupied country is impossible”—one could “only Germanize the land.”¹⁷

The National Socialist settlement policy distinguished itself from previous such policies (among other things) “by a very careful, racially accentuated screening of the candidates who might be settlers.”¹⁸ The State Hereditary Farm Law (*Reichserbhofgesetz*) from September 1933 declared that “the decisive characteristic of the peasant family [was] the biological ability to reproduce.”¹⁹ This law also provided direction for the first corrective measures intended for economically backward and “distressed areas” such as the Rhön Mountains in Thuringia, Hesse, and Bavaria. Beginning in 1934, the latter area was to be developed in a “National Socialist sense” on the basis of a policy named the “Dr. Hellmuth Plan,” Otto Hellmuth being the NSDAP Gauleiter of Lower Franconia. Even the initial draft of this plan in late 1933 contained the demand that the “area of the Rhön [must be] cleansed of foreign races [...] who up to then had taken advantage of the plight of the people in the Rhön.”²⁰

As in early 1934 the party and state authorities in Lower Franconia began cooperating with spatial researchers at the University of Würzburg, the focus of the scientists’ planning and investigating moved even closer towards surveys to classify racial aspects of the population.²¹ In the years following, these surveys gained “a special importance” in “connection with the major settlement initiatives and structural reorganization of the distressed areas” in

¹⁵ JOACHIM NICOLAS TREZIB: Die Theorie der zentralen Orte in Israel und Deutschland: Zur Rezeption Walter Christallers im Kontext von Sharonplan und “Generalplan Ost,” Berlin—Boston 2014, p. 464.

¹⁶ JAN G. SMIT: Neubildung deutschen Bauerntums: Innere Kolonisation im Dritten Reich—Fallstudien in Schleswig-Holstein, Kassel 1983, pp. 62–68.

¹⁷ ANDREAS WIRSCHING: “Man kann nur Boden germanisieren”: Eine neue Quelle zu Hitlers Rede vor den Spitzen der Reichswehr am 3. Februar 1933, in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 49 (2001), pp. 517–550.

¹⁸ GUSTAVO CORNI, HORST GIES: Brot—Butter—Kanonen: Die Ernährungswirtschaft in Deutschland unter der Diktatur Hitlers, Berlin 1997, p. 301.

¹⁹ UWE MAI: “Rasse und Raum”: Agrarpolitik, Sozial- und Raumplanung im NS-Staat, Paderborn et al. 2002, p. 50.

²⁰ JOACHIM S. HOHMANN: Landvolk unterm Hakenkreuz: Agrar- und Rassenpolitik in der Rhön. Ein Beitrag zur Landesgeschichte Bayerns, Hessens und Thüringens, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main 1992, p. 44.

²¹ JOSEF DAUSACKER: Rassenkundliche Erhebungen in den Rhöndörfern Geroda und Platz, Würzburg 1935.

the Rhön,²² so that “proper screening, indeed the very precondition for the advancement of a people, [...] would reassume its rightful place.”²³

3 Reich Working Group for Spatial Research

As a consequence of this cooperation, the ideologization of German spatial research did not take place (as Michael Venhoff suggests) “in spite of all its ‘scientification’,”²⁴ but, to the contrary, went hand in hand with it: ideology was essential in the academic process of bringing research into line with the objectives of National Socialist policies. Initially, as several protagonists were competing for influence in the scholarly analysis of spatial topics, German spatial research in its institutional development only hesitantly attuned to this ideologization. Moreover, the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture and the Reich Ministry of Labor, the NSDAP “Commissioner for all settlement issues,” Johann Wilhelm Ludowici, turned in 1935 to the German universities for the creation of an Academy for Regional Research and Reich Planning (Akademie für Landesforschung und Reichsplanung).²⁵

At the turn of the years 1935/36, the Reich Ministers Hanns Kerrl (who had no portfolio) and Bernhard Rust (for Science and Education) came to be in charge of the efforts to academically institutionalize spatial research. Both were ministers with comparatively little influence in the National Socialist leadership. Still, with the former Prussian Ministry of Culture—now transformed into the Reich Ministry for Science, Education, and Culture (Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung)—Minister Rust had a functioning agency at his disposal whose key positions were held by experienced scientists and politically reliable National Socialists, such as Konrad Meyer and Rudolf Mentzel.²⁶ In December 1935, the RAG was founded, and, two months later, there was a decree to create Higher Education Working Groups for Spatial Research (Hochschularbeitsgemeinschaften für Raumforschung, HAG) at all German universities.²⁷ Meyer became the head of the

²² KONRAD MEYER (ed.): *Volk und Lebensraum: Forschungen im Dienste von Raumordnung und Landesplanung*, Heidelberg et al. 1938, p. 559.

²³ LUDWIG SCHMIDT-KEHL: *Der Mensch in der Rhön*, in: *Raumforschung und Raumordnung (RuR)* 2 (1938), 2, pp. 73–74, here p. 74.

²⁴ MICHAEL VENHOFF: *Die Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung (RAG) und die reichsdeutsche Raumplanung seit ihrer Entstehung bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges 1945*, Hannover 2000, p. 25.

²⁵ DIETER MÜNK: *Die Organisation des Raumes im Nationalsozialismus: Eine soziologische Untersuchung ideologisch fundierter Leitbilder in Architektur, Städtebau und Raumplanung des Dritten Reiches*, Bonn 1993, pp. 180–187.

²⁶ ANJA C. NAGEL: *Hitlers Bildungsreformer: Das Reichsministerium für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung 1934–1945*, Frankfurt am Main 2012.

²⁷ *Rechtsgrundlagen der Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung*, in: *RuR* 1 (1936/37), 1, pp. 50–51.

RAG. He generously funded research at the universities, and, with their help, proceeded to displace Ludowici's Academy.

Funding for research projects was linked to the HAGs, which promoted their regional orientation. It also made it easier for the regime's regional authorities to exercise political control over the HAGs' scholarly work. Starting in October 1936, the RAG began publishing a journal entitled *Raumforschung und Raumordnung* (Spatial Research and Planning, RuR), which quickly became an instrument of guidance. In the next few years, the journal followed the expansive foreign policy of the NS-regime and the course of the war, providing both with a spatially scientific foundation, as evident in topical issues such as "Spatial Planning in the Districts of the Eastern March" (i.e., Austria after its annexation) or "Sudetenland, Bohemia, and Moravia."²⁸

This institutionalization²⁹ was motivated by explicit political objectives that further advanced the amalgamation of "race" and "space." Konrad Meyer and the RAG general manager Friedrich Bülow³⁰ were the protagonists in this. Meyer called for "a spatial order in accordance with the requirements of a nation in the National Socialist sense [volksgemäß]," and he characterized the RAG as a "bold effort to allow the National Socialist ideas of community and a shared identity, as well as the principles of order, leadership, and loyalty rooted in these ideas also to unfold their effectiveness in science."³¹ Bülow supported Meyer in this, observing that as long as the RAG "were to be mobilized for *volkspolitische* objectives," it could be "referred to as a scholarly self-governing corporation."³² In this instance, the claim of scholarly "self-governance" referred to the administrative office of the RAG overseeing research efforts, as well as to the politically motivated, focused financial support from the extensive national resources and the German research community.³³

Universities immediately recognized the HAGs as being lucrative financial resources. In places where spatial science institutes or contact persons were not yet available, university rectors took on temporary leadership of the working groups. They thus offered the perfect framework for the academic self-mobilization of spatial researchers, who soon started looking for potential col-

²⁸ See the topical issues "Raumordnung in den Gauen der Ostmark," in: RuR 2 (1938), 9, pp. 385–464, and "Der Sudetenraum," in: RuR 5 (1941), 10/12, pp. 427–623.

²⁹ MECHTILD RÖSSLER: Die Institutionalisierung einer neuen Wissenschaft im Nationalsozialismus: Raumforschung und Raumordnung 1935–1945, in: *Geographische Zeitschrift* 75 (1987), pp. 177–194.

³⁰ HEINZ RIETER: Ökonomen im Dienste der nationalsozialistischen Raumplanung und "Raumforschung," in: HANS-MICHAEL TRAUTWEIN (ed.): *Die Entwicklung der Raumwirtschaftslehre von ihren Anfängen bis in die Gegenwart*, Berlin 2014, pp. 239–332.

³¹ KONRAD MEYER: Raumforschung, in: RuR 1 (1936/37), 1, pp. 2–4, here p. 3.

³² FRIEDRICH BÜLOW: Raumordnung, Raumforschung und Wirtschaftswissenschaft, in: *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv* 47 (1938), pp. 300–321, here p. 313.

³³ LEENDERTZ, *Ordnung*, pp. 115–126.

laborators outside of the academic realm.³⁴ After the annexation of Austria to the German Reich in the spring of 1938, the *ad hoc* establishment of a HAG at the University of Vienna under the direction of Hugo Hassinger proved just how speedily and effectively this National Socialist institution could be put to use to mobilize academic resources.³⁵ In that same year, Meyer pointed out in a published progress report that the RAG had had success in “directing research towards the sources of our national life: the people and *Lebensraum*, blood and soil.”³⁶ The individual contributions in that report are not limited to agrarian research fields. Among other issues, they deal with the impact of wage differences on selecting the locations for industrial plants³⁷ or the relationship between “race and accommodations” in large cities.³⁸

The publications of the RAG illustrate that individual research projects were limited to examining regions, sectors, or population groups. Thus a type of “restricted research” was created that higher authorities could use in different contexts—for example, to take stock of economic policy measures, to assess a regional demographic group, or to evaluate future settlement plans. The “restricted research” thereby provided the basis for unlimited use of the findings of spatial science research in the coming war.

4 New Order

With the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the RAG adjusted the regional focus of the HAGs to fit “a research program essential to the war effort.” It did so by shifting this focus to the “East” as the “most pressing primary topic,” which meant “giving priority to questions regarding a pan-European order, and, even more so, the German *Lebensraum*.”³⁹ A “crash program” with six “main tasks” was established, of which the second encompassed “studies of the possibilities for the strengthening and consolidating of the German Nationhood [Stärkung und Festigung des deutschen Volkstums]

³⁴ MAI, pp. 101–107, 149–151.

³⁵ PETRA SVATEK: “Das südöstliche Europa als Forschungsraum”: Wiener Raumforschung und “Lebensraumpolitik,” in: SÖREN FLACHOWSKY, RÜDIGER HACHTMANN et al. (eds.): Ressourcenmobilisierung: Wissenschaftspolitik und Forschungspraxis im NS-Herrschaftssystem, Göttingen 2017, pp. 82–120.

³⁶ KONRAD MEYER: Zur Einführung, in: IDEM (ed.): Volk und Lebensraum: Forschungen im Dienste von Raumordnung und Landesplanung, Heidelberg et al. 1938, p. 5.

³⁷ GÜNTER SCHMÖLDERS: Industriauflockerung durch Lohngefälle, *ibidem*, pp. 185–196.

³⁸ ROMAN HEILIGENTHAL: Rasse und Wohnung in der großen Agglomeration, *ibidem*, pp. 197–203.

³⁹ Das kriegswichtige Forschungsprogramm der Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung, in: RuR 3 (1939), 10, p. 502.

and the building up of new German national lands in the German Eastern space [Ostraum].”⁴⁰

In early December 1939, a first meeting of the working group assigned to this primary objective took place, during which the new head of the RAG, Paul Ritterbusch,⁴¹ stressed the idea that “in the war” the German national leadership had “assigned to science quite specific large-scale tasks.” Their “speedy completion” would contribute to showing that “the science embedded in the nation [serves] the goals which the Führer has set.” Gerhard Isenberg, a staff member in the Reich Department for Spatial Planning (Reichsstelle für Raumordnung), which guided the RAG, stressed that “the questions of resettlement and new settlement [...] were contingent on a clarification of the load-bearing capacity [Tragfähigkeit] of the countryside.” He asked, “[h]ow many people have to be removed, and, concerning the settlement, how many people must remain in order to serve the interest of a *Lebensraum*?” In the discussion that followed, the specifications for new research projects focusing on East Central Europe met with approval, although individual scientists sounded a note of caution: “none of the most valuable populations from the endangered western regions should be settled in the east,” since such a loss would create “a weakened buffer zone against the powerful Walloon nation.”⁴² At this meeting it became clear that the participating researchers had not only accepted the ideological guidelines, but were using them as a foundation of their work. The researchers had a clear idea of the extent of the planned resettlement.

The rapid implementation of the “war research program” illustrates how comprehensively the RAG had succeeded in establishing itself as a politically reliable body for directing German spatial research in the course of the previous four years. The choice of wording in referring to the second task of the RAG “crash program” as a “strengthening and consolidating of German Nationhood” shows, moreover, that the RAG was orienting itself towards Himmler’s power center; Hitler had appointed him as Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums, RKF) in October 1939. Konrad Meyer understood these shifts in the parallelogram of forces with regard to the occupation policies. He transferred to the staff of the RKF without entirely breaking off

⁴⁰ HERMANN ROLOFF: Die Mitarbeit der Wissenschaft bei der Ordnung und Gestaltung des deutschen Ostraums, in: RuR 3 (1939), 11/12, pp. 535–542.

⁴¹ MARTIN GÖLLNITZ: Paul Ritterbusch, in: MICHAEL FAHLBUSCH, INGO HAAR et al. (eds.): Handbuch der völkischen Wissenschaften: Akteure, Netzwerke, Forschungsprogramme, vol. 1, 2nd ed., Berlin—Boston 2017, pp. 640–645.

⁴² Protokoll der Sitzung des Arbeitskreises II (“Untersuchungen über die Möglichkeiten der Stärkung und Festigung des deutschen Volkstums und der Bildung neuen deutschen Volksbodens im deutschen Ostraum”) des kriegswichtigen Forschungsprogramms am 4.12.1939, in: Universitätsarchiv Wien, Nachlass Hugo Hassinger, box 15 [emphasis in the original].

his contacts with the researchers organized in the RAG. Himmler's increasingly powerful position formed the basis for Meyer's own planning. He now had his own research staff, which was largely independent of the spatial research being done at the universities.⁴³

As RKF, Himmler quickly attained a key position in the preparation and implementation of the resettlement policy and apportioned tasks among the participating institutions. The HAGs now formed a link in the chain of action that the SS determined with regard to the spatial and population sciences, including assignments of tasks, areas of competence, resources, and clear delimitations as far as other participating agencies were concerned. The regional division of research that the RAG had organized facilitated this approach. For instance, the HAG of the University of Jena set about analyzing the possibilities of a "relocation of people from the Gau of Thuringia," a project it carried out in coordination with the NSDAP-Gauleitung, the Thuringian ministries, the Regional State Office for Racial Matters (Landesamt für Rassenwesen), as well as regional settlement societies.⁴⁴ Their intention was to create the right conditions so that "in Thuringia, only robust peasant farms" would be established "in the future."⁴⁵ In the summer of 1940, the RAG gathered together this and other regional "research investigations to examine the spatial structure in the *Altreich* [i.e., the territory of the German Reich prior to the war] in light of the future transformation of the German eastern regions." The RAG also offered in this context "to clarify any doubts that might arise."⁴⁶ The results of this survey were published in RuR in the context of a "recovery of proper agricultural conditions" in the *Altreich*.⁴⁷

Once again, the departmentalized and hierarchical research practices of the RAG proved to be instrumental in specifying and implementing National Socialist goals. At the same time (and depending on the situation), it offered individual scientists the opportunity to present their work as either independent of or essential to the National Socialist population policies.⁴⁸ Yet, irre-

⁴³ See the statement of Meyer's colleagues in: CZESŁAW MADAJCZYK: Vom Generalplan Ost zum Generalsiedlungsplan, München et al. 1994, pp. 156–159 (doc. 37), as well as the list of authors in: KONRAD MEYER (ed.): Landvolk im Werden: Material zum ländlichen Aufbau in den neuen Ostgebieten und zur Gestaltung des dörflichen Lebens, Berlin 1941, p. 376.

⁴⁴ Research application from Prof. Asmus Petersen relating to "Schaffung von Unterlagen für die Umsiedlung aus dem Gau Thüringen und die Neuordnung der ausgesiedelten Gebiete," 1940-03-08, in: Universitätsarchiv Jena, sign. S XV/18.

⁴⁵ Schreiben der Landesbauernschaft Thüringen, 1940-02-21, *ibidem*.

⁴⁶ RAG an die Hochschularbeitsgemeinschaft Jena mit Anlage, 1940-06-04, *ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Several articles regarding "Gesundung der Agrarverhältnisse und Aussiedlungsmöglichkeiten," in: RuR 4 (1940), 3/4, pp. 183–237.

⁴⁸ For example, from 1939 to 1944/45, the economist August Lösch in Kiel worked on RAG research projects essential to the war effort, yet at the same time he distanced himself from the ideological objectives of that work; ROLAND RIEGGER (ed.): August Lösch in memoriam, Heidenheim 1971, pp. 102–110.

spective of these efforts, the German spatial researchers always served as conceptional push-factors for population movements, which, in turn, were essential for the Germans' campaigns of murder in East Central Europe between 1939 and 1941.⁴⁹ They legitimized an important political connection between alleged necessities in the *Altreich* and a "new order" as for example in the Warthegau, where Gauleiter Arthur Greiser "spearheaded one of the most dramatic and sustained Nazi demographic experiments."⁵⁰

The spatial researchers contributed "to establishing thought patterns stabilizing the regime."⁵¹ Even though, in practice, resettlement from areas of the *Altreich* was initially deferred in order to accommodate the so-called ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and was eventually given up altogether because of the course of the war,⁵² the RAG-research on the *Altreich* remained an important factor in legitimizing the NS resettlement policy. It also provided conceptional justifications for the ongoing "ethnic reallocation of land."⁵³ Spatial research approaches played an essential role in this context, especially the "central place theory" developed by the geographer Walter Christaller in the early 1930s, which hierarchized towns and settlements by assigning to them more or less central tasks.⁵⁴ In the German "new order," this model became an important instrument for disregarding historically evolved settlement structures in East Central and Eastern Europe.⁵⁵

Equally important—and for the populations in the occupied territories even more disastrous—were ideas of a "load-bearing capacity" of spaces, developed (as mentioned) primarily by Gerhard Isenberg. In 1941, the RAG presented a "joint project" it had commissioned, which contained five individual studies on the "structure and design of the central spaces in the German East."

⁴⁹ CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: Nazi Resettlement Policy and the Search for a Solution to the Jewish Question, 1939–1941, in: German Studies Review 9 (1986), pp. 497–519.

⁵⁰ CATHERINE EPSTEIN: Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland, Oxford—New York 2010, p. 160.

⁵¹ MARTIN MUNKE: Georg Leibbrandt—Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete: Ein gelehrter Radikaler, in: HANS-CHRISTIAN RASCH, CHRISTOPH KREUTZMÜLLER (eds.): Die Teilnehmer: Die Männer der Wannsee-Konferenz, Berlin 2017, pp. 213–226, here p. 217.

⁵² DEBORAH DWORK, ROBERT JAN VAN PELT: Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present, New York—London 1996, pp. 163–196.

⁵³ GÖTZ ALY: Endlösung: Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden, Frankfurt am Main 1995, p. 35.

⁵⁴ WALTER CHRISTALLER: Die zentralen Orte in Süddeutschland: Eine ökonomisch-geographische Untersuchung über die Gesetzmäßigkeit der Verbreitung und Entwicklung der Siedlungen mit städtischen Funktionen, Jena 1933.

⁵⁵ KARL R. KEGLER: Deutsche Raumplanung: Das Modell der "Zentralen Orte" zwischen NS-Staat und Bundesrepublik, Paderborn 2015, pp. 232–236. In 1940, Christaller became a colleague of Meyer at the RKF. See as well: MECHTILD RÖSSLER: Applied Geography and Area Research in Nazi Society: Central Place Theory and Planning, 1933–1945, in: PAOLO GIACCARIA, CLAUDIO MINCA (eds.): Hitler's Geographies: The Spatialities of the Third Reich, Chicago 2016, pp. 182–197.

They were intended for “official use only.” Isenberg’s contribution regarding “the load-bearing capacity of the German East” identified as an “important task of spatial research” the necessary preparation of the “calculations of the natural load-bearing capacity of the European regions.”⁵⁶ In essence, a scientifically construed “load-bearing capacity” of spatial structures implied the possible overstressing of a region by “too many” people and thus offered a rationale for resettlement measures.⁵⁷ At the same time, Isenberg’s conclusions, which were underpinned with numerous statistics, actually concealed blatant social and cultural prejudices. For instance, he elaborated on the fact that “when different races and national groups live together [...], the dominated part is generally pushed onto the poorest lands [...] for only the dominated part, being forced into an unaspiring way of life,” would be able “to generate income from the poor lands without being consumed by the costs.” As it were, “the load-bearing capacity of the national group being dominated differs from that of the ruling group.”⁵⁸ Isenberg thus provided the German occupiers with a scientific cloak for their plan to relegate the peoples of East Central and Eastern Europe to the status of Helots.

5 Proximity to and Distance from the Genocide

With studies such as that produced by Isenberg, the RAG was able to prove the “importance” of its research “to the war effort.” In practical terms, the RAG expanded its participation in the planning for the German-occupied areas of Eastern Europe. Among other activities, RAG experts participated alongside regionally responsible state planners in infrastructure projects such as “water control projects” in the General Government.⁵⁹ The physical structures were to be built by Jewish forced laborers.⁶⁰ Their mistreatment by the units of SS and police leader of the Lublin district Odilo Globocnik bordered on “annihilation through labor,” which did not go unnoticed by the planners, since many construction projects soon stagnated and often enough could not be finished due to the exhaustion and high mortality of the forced laborers.⁶¹

The collaboration between spatial researchers and regional planners grew even closer during this period. They found common ground in their shared

⁵⁶ GERHARD ISENBERG: *Die Tragfähigkeit des deutschen Ostens an landwirtschaftlicher und gewerblicher Bevölkerung*, Leipzig 1941, p. 6.

⁵⁷ LEENDERTZ, *Ordnung*, pp. 163–167.

⁵⁸ ISENBERG, *Tragfähigkeit*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ DAVID BLACKBOURN: *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*, London 2006, pp. 276–277; *Verkehrs- und Wirtschaftsfragen in den Ostgebieten*, in: *RuR* 4 (1940), 3/4, pp. 200–211.

⁶⁰ WERNER PRÄG, WOLFGANG JACOBMEYER (eds.): *Das Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939–1945*, Stuttgart 1975, pp. 190, 348.

⁶¹ CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 63–65.

denigration of East Central European culture. Regional planners such as Gerhard Ziegler in Upper Silesia or Hansjörg Schepers in the General Government found not only peers in spatial science expertise in the RAG, but also an important forum in RuR to present their experiences with “spatial order and planning in neighboring territories.”⁶² Ziegler was the regional planner in Katowice in Upper Silesia and was also in charge of the expansion of the industrial district of Auschwitz. In 1941 in a document illustrated with photos bearing his disparaging comments, he called for the “organic expansion” of Upper Silesian towns, stating that he was “appalled” by their “cultural decline.” These towns were located in what the German planners had defined as “reconstruction and expansion zones” relative to those in the region Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, which was declared as a “zone for new construction.”⁶³ A year later, Schepers described the challenge for regional planning in occupied Poland as the need “creatively to collaborate in the reshaping of a totally disorderly region.”⁶⁴ Such scientific trimming of deep-seated prejudices and antipathies was a rehearsed practice in the community of German spatial researchers and regional planners.

As the “new order” was taking shape in East Central Europe, the recruiting of German “settlers” from the *Altreich* expanded as well. In the context of the resettlement policy, the RKF had requested the RAG in late 1941 “on the basis of statistical and other data to determine at the district level the transfer or in other words the needs in the individual territories of the *Altreich*” and “to point out which territories most urgently needed an adjusting of the numbers of workers serving local needs [Nahbedarfstätige].”⁶⁵ The term was used to describe local resident craftsmen and traders. The planners calculated their “usefulness” with the help of statistical models they borrowed from the breeding or hunting business, which estimated the necessary number of wild animals in a certain forest or area in order to have a viable population (Besatzziffer). In the planners’ view, these statistical models and numbers would determine the crucial “load-bearing capacity” of a region or a town.⁶⁶ The surveys in the *Altreich* were carried out until the spring of 1942,⁶⁷ with Isen-

⁶² RuR 6 (1942), 6/7, p. 159.

⁶³ GERHARD ZIEGLER: Grundlagen des künftigen Städtebaus in Oberschlesien, in: RuR 5 (1941), 3/4, pp. 151–159, here p. 155.

⁶⁴ HANS JULIUS SCHEPERS: Raumordnung im Generalgouvernement, in: RuR 6 (1942), 6/7, pp. 202–216, here p. 208.

⁶⁵ Vermerk über eine Besprechung des Engeren Beirats der Reichswirtschaftskammer mit Vertretern des Reichskommissars für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums am 19. November 1941, in: ROLF-DIETER MÜLLER: Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik, München 1991, pp. 167–169, here p. 168.

⁶⁶ JÖRG GUTBERGER: Sozialstruktur- und Sozialraumforschung im Nationalsozialismus—Eine Skizze der Forschungslinien, in: Jahrbuch für Soziologiegeschichte 1992 [1994], pp. 51–113, here p. 70.

⁶⁷ MICHAEL G. ESCH: “Gesunde Verhältnisse”: Deutsche und polnische Bevölkerungspolitik 1939–1950, Marburg 1998, pp. 90–92, and MICHAEL A. HARTENSTEIN: Neue

berg publishing the results. He concluded that there was “hardly any part of the Reich” “in which a healthy agricultural structure” had “truly” been “achieved.”⁶⁸

By this point, however, spatial research had been decoupled from the Holocaust. Early drafts of the General Plan East from the period up to the end of 1941 had still engaged in rather extensive discussions about the “resettlement” of local Slavic and Jewish populations of Eastern Europe in order to create space for German settlers. Different departments fought about the total number of people who would need to be displaced, and a commentator from the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories held that the quoted number of 45 million “alien nationals” (*Fremdvölkische*) would only be correct “if one assumes that the approximately 5 to 6 million Jews living in these areas [were to be] eliminated prior to the evacuation.”⁶⁹ In late May 1942, Konrad Meyer consequently submitted a revised draft of the General Plan East, which consistently left out all references to resettlement. For Christopher Browning the absence of references to resettlement proves that a process of decoupling had occurred, i.e., a “solution to the Jewish question was no longer part of the wider framework of a vast decimation and expulsion of Slavs but had gained an autonomy and priority it had not enjoyed earlier.”⁷⁰ By implication, it also meant that the spatial and resettlement planning at the RKF—as well as the pertinent preparatory work of the RAG—had previously been connected to the “solution of the Jewish question.”

When by the summer of 1942, any mentioning of the “solution to the Jewish question” referred solely to the large-scale agenda of murder, the researchers of the RAG were no longer directly involved in the planning and implementation of the genocide. However, they remained in close proximity to it. In addition to the ongoing “accompanying research”⁷¹ for the General Plan East, beginning in the summer of 1942, the spatial researchers began taking stock of the presumably permanently occupied territories in Eastern Europe. For instance, in the second half of August 1942, Hans-Bernhard von Grünberg, rector of the University of Königsberg in East Prussia and head of the local HAG, together with a group of officials examined the political and economic situation in German-occupied Ukraine (*Reichskommissariat Ukraine*). Besides discussing the extent of partisan activity and the faltering development of industry, trade, and agriculture, the travel report repeatedly

Dorflandschaften: Nationalsozialistische Siedlungsplanung in den “eingegliederten Ostgebieten” 1939 bis 1944, Berlin 1998, pp. 221–226.

⁶⁸ GERHARD ISENBERG: Der Umfang und die Auswirkungen der ländlichen Neuordnung in Deutschland, in: Deutsche Verwaltung 19 (1942), pp. 144–147.

⁶⁹ MADAJCZYK, p. 54 (doc. 16).

⁷⁰ CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942, Lincoln—Jerusalem 2004, p. 241.

⁷¹ GUNNAR TAKE: Forschen für den Wirtschaftskrieg: Das Kieler Institut für Weltwirtschaft im Nationalsozialismus, Berlin—Boston 2019, p. 294.

mentioned the murder of the previously resident Jewish population. Regarding, for example, the territory of Vinnytsia, one reads, “40,000 Jews have been liquidated in the area. Only in Vinnytsia a mere 300 specialist craftsmen work in the clothing factory. They are barracked in the back buildings of the factory. The local population welcomes the elimination of the Jews.”⁷² Knowledge of the genocide spread, and so it was only logical that an academic population map in 1943 contained the short remark that “Jews [...] were not taken into account.”⁷³

The RAG researchers also had an interest in academic libraries and scientific institutes in Eastern Europe, whose resources they wanted to exploit—only to have to find that other German looters had been quicker. The spatial researchers had to content themselves with the libraries in the *Altreich*.⁷⁴ With the military retreat from 1943 onwards, one may detect in the RAG research a “return to the *Altreich*.”⁷⁵ The connection of “race” and “space” nonetheless remained at the center of research. The final war edition of RuR in the spring of 1944 phrased it as follows: “the future tasks of German agriculture” would be the “settlement of the East and a new order in the *Altreich*.”⁷⁶ Antisemitism also remained a central component of the RAG’s activity. In its research program for 1944, “around 34,000 Reichsmark [were allocated] for research on ‘the influence of the Jews in the world economy’.”⁷⁷

6 Diffusing the Responsibility

In the summer of 1944, the newly appointed RAG chairman, Kurt Brüning,⁷⁸ moved the RAG’s head office from Berlin to Hanover, where it resumed

⁷² Undated report “Bereisung des Reichskommissariats (Ukraine, 13.8.–1.9.1942),” in: Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte, Bremen, sign. V.01. Mikrofilme, 8. Krakau, Universitätsarchiv Krakow, Institut für deutsche Ostarbeit, no. 1985 ROK (SfS).

⁷³ Legend of the map “Der Donaumaum: Volksgruppen aus Südosteuropa nach dem Zweiten Wiener Schiedsspruch 1940,” Gotha 1943.

⁷⁴ Undated “Protokoll über die Besprechung der Russlandarbeit am 14.9.1942,” in: SfS. Among others, the RAG chairman for Russia related projects, John Boyens, as well as representatives of the HAGs in Wrocław (Breslau) (Hans-Jürgen Seraphim), Kiel (Oskar Nikolaevich Anderson) and Königsberg (Hans-Bernhard von Grünberg) participated in the meeting.

⁷⁵ VENHOFF, p. 68.

⁷⁶ MAX ACHILLES: Beiträge zur Neuordnung der Landwirtschaft in Mecklenburg, in: RuR 8 (1944), 2, p. 41–50, here p. 41.

⁷⁷ Kurt Brüning to Franz Werneke (Oberpräsident Hannover, Abteilung Kultus), 1945-12-04, in: Archiv der Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, Hanover, collection Karl Haubner (in the following: Haubner).

⁷⁸ OLIVER WERNER: Raumwissenschaftliche Deutungshoheiten in der frühen Bundesrepublik: Die Konflikte der “Akademie für Raumforschung und Landesplanung” um die Rechtsnachfolge der “Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung” (1945 bis 1955), in: FRANK BECKER, DARIUS HARWARDT et al. (eds.): Die Verortung der Bundes-

work immediately after the end of the war. In June 1945, research topics were deleted, including “racial science, racial and ethnic biology and similar subjects also denoted in veiled phrases [Tarnbezeichnungen]”⁷⁹—they knew quite well which aspects of their previous work were no longer justifiable. In the following years, the work of the institution, which from 1946 operated under the name of ARL, focused on spatial science surveys of West German post-war society.

Brüning’s predecessor Konrad Meyer was indicted at Nuremberg but was saved by a defense strategy in which his former colleagues downplayed their role in the General Plan East. One colleague spoke of “surely a most peaceful work”⁸⁰ in reference to a decree issued in 1942 “about the configuration of the countryside in the annexed eastern territories,” which Meyer had prepared and Heinrich Himmler had signed. Among other things, the decree asserted that the countryside in the “eastern territories” had been “neglected, made desolate, and devastated through exhaustive cultivation” thanks to “the cultural ineptness of foreign ethnic groups,”⁸¹ referring, of course, not to the German occupiers, but rather to the native population. Herbert Morgen, who until 1944 was a close co-worker of Meyer’s, and from 1966 to 1970 was president of the ARL, “emphasized the idealistic, peaceful, and above all innovative character of Meyer’s scholarship.” Many “of his research results could lay claim to lasting value.”⁸²

With their research, the German spatial researchers organized in the RAG were an essential link in the chain of action of the National Socialist space and population policy, which ultimately led to genocide through planning for resettlement from the *Altreich* into the “new German East” and through systematically devaluing the native population in East Central Europe. In this process, investigations into the resettlement capacity for the “recovery” of agricultural regions in the *Altreich* were of significance. Equally important were, however, the concepts on which these research projects were based, such as the idea of a cultural superiority of the Germans over the native populations in East Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the model of a limited spatial “load-bearing capacity” that would also “limit” the right to exist of the people then living in those spaces.

republik: Ideen und Symbole politischer Geographie nach 1945, Bielefeld 2020, pp. 73–87.

⁷⁹ Decree of the *Oberpräsident* of the Prussian province Hannover from 1945-06-26, in: Haubner. The text of the decree was clearly coordinated beforehand with Brüning.

⁸⁰ Statement by Heinrich Wiepking-Jürgensmann, 1947-12-06, in: Bundesarchiv Koblenz, sign. ALLPROZ 1/XXXXIV/M5, pp. 16–17a, here p. 17.

⁸¹ RÖSSLER/SCHLEIERMACHER, p. 136.

⁸² ISABEL HEINEMANN: Wissenschaft und Homogenisierungsplanungen für Osteuropa: Konrad Meyer, der “Generalplan Ost” und die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, in: EADEM, PATRICK WAGNER (eds.): Wissenschaft—Planung—Vertreibung: Neuordnungskonzepte und Umsiedlungspolitik im 20. Jahrhundert, Stuttgart 2006, pp. 45–72, here p. 66.

The spatial researchers neither discussed nor questioned any possible repercussions of these notions on their scholarly praxis and the specific orientation of German spatial sciences under National Socialism. In retrospect, the community of spatial scientists agreed that “for good reason, it would be better to remain silent about the Eastern planning in any historical self-portrayal and tradition building.”⁸³ Research approaches that had been “tried and tested” in Eastern Europe could nonetheless be offered in slightly modified form for post-war social and political design projects. A particularly striking case in point is Gerhard Isenberg’s model of spatial “load-bearing capacity,” which was resurrected as a scientific instrument after 1945 in dealing with the resettlement of millions of refugees and displaced persons arriving from East Central Europe. In this, a new meaning was established for an idea originally embedded in National Socialist ideology and policy.⁸⁴

By resorting to the National Socialist spatial research in different political circumstances, West German authorities and governments effectively assisted regional planners in concealing their lack of engagement in any reflection on the methodological and moral aspects of their role in Nazi Germany. In retrospect, spatial researchers’ lack of reflection meant the self-discrediting of their science, which was already contaminated by their support of the National Socialist genocide and the destruction of East Central and Eastern Europe.

Translated from the German by Philip Jacobs and Anja Werner

⁸³ ARIANE LEENDERTZ: Raumforschung, Raumplanung und NS-Vergangenheit: Forschungsstand, Deutungen, Kontinuitäten, in: HEINRICH MÄDING, WENDELIN STRUBELT (eds.): Vom Dritten Reich zur Bundesrepublik: Beiträge einer Tagung zur Geschichte von Raumforschung und Raumplanung, Hannover 2009, pp. 21–38, here p. 32.

⁸⁴ GERHARD ISENBERG: Zur Frage der Tragfähigkeit von Staats- und Wirtschaftsräumen, in: RuR 9 (1948), 2, pp. 41–51.

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- tion: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies, London—New York 2010, pp. 21–29.
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