



Karl Haushofer in the German Geopolitical School: Geopolitician of Nazism or Unappreciated Geopolitical Thinker – An Overview

Arash Sharghi^{1*}; Irina Dotu²

¹PhD, IPE Club, Ankara, Turkey

²International Relations Department, Near East University, TRNC

ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, the works of the famous German general, geographer and geopolitical thinker Karl Haushofer were forbidden. Himself, driven to despair, had committed suicide with the hope to be forgotten and lost in history. Haushofer's major ideas, in particular, his idea of "living space" or "Lebensraum", which inspired Adolf Hitler and Herman Hess, were regarded as theoretical background for Nazi ideology and Hitler's aggressive politics in Europe, and Haushofer himself was seen as one of the main ideologists of German fascism.

Meanwhile, while having a deeper look into Haushofer's ideas it can be observed that he has never been a proponent of war. On the contrary, his theory was designed in way, which he thought would bring a long-lasting peace in Europe. His "continental block" theory was aimed on creating a Eurasian block between Germany and Soviet Union against Power of the Sea countries, which he believed were the source of unrest and strife.

This paper is aimed to discuss the main concepts and ideas of Karl Haushofer within the German geopolitical school and to understand was he a geopolitician of Nazism or undeservedly forgotten geopolitical thinker and how actual his ideas are nowadays.

Keywords: *Karl Haushofer, "living space", "Lebensraum", "continental block", geopolitics, Nazism*

Citation: Arash Sharghi & Irina Dotu (2021). Karl Haushofer in the German Geopolitical School: Geopolitician of Nazism or Unappreciated Geopolitical Thinker – An Overview. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(6), 188-193.

INTRODUCTION

Classical European continental geopolitical school is one of the most known ecoles of geopolitical thought. According to the common opinion of researchers from the field, geopolitics as a science took its roots and developed institutionally. The major geopolitical concepts like "living space", "heartland", "middle Europe", "territorial expansion law", "continental state" and many others were for the first time used by Carl Ritter, Friedrich Ratzel, Rudolf Kjellen, Leopold von Ranke, and Karl Haushofer, who are considered the major thinkers and founders of classical continental geopolitics in XIX-XX centuries.

The father of the discipline is considered to be Friedrich Ratzel and his work *Politische Geographie (Political Geography, 1897)*, which has manifested the birth of what is called today political geography. Traditionally, political geography had used the state as a primary unit of analysis. The internal organization of states and interactions between them both on regional and international levels were the center of research studies of political geographers [1].

One of the most important contributions to the political geography and geopolitics disciplines was the Ratzel's concept of *Lebensraum*, or living space. This was meant by Ratzel as "living area within which living organisms develop" [2]. Ratzel has stated that as population of a state is growing, a more territory is needed. This leads to the struggle for the space, in which a gain in territory of more powerful becomes a loss of its weaker neighbors. Thus, in the cases of the states, as well as in the life of living organism we observe an ongoing struggle for survival, where the fittest wins. Ratzel had distinguished between two types of *Lebensraum*: one was the general one, and another one was natural *Lebensraum* of human groups viewed as a biological habitat. Ratzel political geography had drawn an image of "everlasting battle of states for the largest possible and most valuable property in land". Accordingly, if the power concept does not match the geographical knowledge, the existence of the state is threatened by the struggle for power [3].

The first to use the term of *geopolitics* was Swedish geographer and political scientist Rudolf Kjellen [4] in 1898. Both him and his counterpart, German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, were the proponents of the "organic state" theory and

compared the state with a living organism, which should extend its space and expand in order to develop [5]. In accordance to this idea, Kjellen has defined the geopolitics as “a study of the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space; that is as a land, territory, area, or, most pregnantly, as a country” [4].

Friedrich Ratzel and his students created a discipline designed to study the relationship between geography and politics, based on the position of the country, the space it occupies and its borders. Ratzel believed that great nations are those, which have a “space-consciousness” (*Raumsinn*), which requires the expansion of its *Lebensraum* [6]. Consequently, the boundaries may be subject to narrowing or expanding, depending on the dynamism of the people.

Ratzel’s term *Lebensraum* became popular among German war strategists and determined policy of Nazi Germany in 1930-1940. Moreover, it contributed to the popularization of the term *Geopolitik* or geopolitics. During that period of time German geopolitics was developing in two directions. The first – nationalistic, which was based on the national dissatisfaction of the Germans: their excommunication from the processes of creating colonial empires and in defeat in the First World War. The second direction of German geopolitics - internationalist, leftist, social democratic - was embodied in the works of G. Graf, K. Wittfogel, and other supporters of reformist Marxism. It set itself the task of supplementing historical materialism with geographic determinism, linking economic and political relations between people and states to nature, land, and soil. Thus, German geopolitics generated radical (right and left) political theories that differently assessed the possibilities and urgent objectives of Germany [7]. Moreover, as the history had shown, the misused concept of *Lebensraum* led to the point that geopolitics has long suffered from association of German school of geopolitics with Nazi barbarianism [8].

The aforementioned statement could be best proved by analyzing the geopolitical views of Karl Haushofer, who has developed his own doctrine of *Geopolitik* and thus influenced geopolitical discourse more than anyone. It is the name of Haushofer that the flourishing of German geopolitics between the two world wars is associated with. Major General Prof. Dr. Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) was a German army officer, political geographer, politician and leading proponent of geopolitics. His military career developed fast and through the WWI period he raised from officer to the rank of major general. Upon the end of the First World War he started his career in the University of Munich as geography professor; published over 400 books and papers, was editor of the “*Zeitschrift fur Geopolitik*” (“*Journal of Geopolitics*”) and president of German Academy [9].

After the defeat of Germany in the First World War, followed by the “humiliating” for country Versailles Treaty, General Haushofer cogitated upon the reasons of such loss and came to the result that such outcome was related to the isolation of Germany on the continent, non-acquaintance of the war tactics by the leadership and lack of knowledge in the field of geostrategy and the planetary dimension of war. Therefore, Haushofer spent many years to study and understand the global politics, its geopolitical nature and tried to develop German imperialistic and expansionist geostrategy. Haushofer has repeatedly expressed the opinion that the revival of Germany can be achieved provided that “people from the street learn to think geopolitically, and the leaders - to act geopolitically.” To achieve this two-fold goal, K. Haushofer included geopolitics course in the curriculum of the University of Munich and thus acquired a field of activity for the widespread dissemination of revanchist ideas [10].

Notwithstanding to the fact that Karl Haushofer was the one who started to publish the journal on geopolitics he did never explained it as such. He saw geopolitics as a tool and guidance for political action [11]. As Haushofer claimed “—*is the theory of political events integrated into their geographical setting, which —*”intends to and must come to be the geographic conscience of the state” [12]. Thus, the journal established and led by Haushofer through the work of academicians published in it, was tended to legitimize the Nazi policies. Although, a definition of geopolitics was provided and stated that “*geopolitics is the science of conditioning of spatial processes by the earth. As thus conceived, geopolitics aims to be equipment for political action and a guidepost in political life*” [13].

Haushofer was a proponent of Social Darwinism and saw geopolitics as the reason of the state. He considered the main factors of the political power of the state to be its location and territorial characteristics. His basic ideas and phraseology are characterized by aggressiveness and immorality. The key concepts in Haushofer’s concept were “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*), “space and position” (*Raum und Lage*), “strength and space” (*Macht und Raum*), “living space” (*Lebensraum*) [14]. Influenced by Ratzel, Haushofer has viewed concept of *Lebensraum* as a necessary factor for the state development. For him, *Lebensraum* is considered “*a partial area of the Earth’s surface, a piece of the earth’s surface, observed in accordance with its natural or artificial borders, regarding the preservation of the life of the life-forms found therein*” [15]. Like for Ratzel and Kjellen, Haushofer claimed that the major state force is the struggle for ‘living space’ and its expansion constitutes the background of geopolitical actions of a state. Consequently, a powerful state should always expand its borders at a loss of weaker states and small nations. It has been emphasized that Germany is in lack of necessary “*living space*” for its population (*Ibid.*, 100), at the same time, Germany was seen as a strong state

surrounded by weaker ones, thus, the struggle for dominance was theoretically legitimized. Later on, *Lebensraum* became ideology of the Third *Reich* and invasive plans of Nazi Germany were justified.

Karl Haushofer played an eminent role in the determination of Nazi politics. This was possible due to two factors: his close relations with Rudolf Hess and as a result, with Adolf Hitler, and, secondly, due to political stands of Haushofer's two sons Heinz and Albrecht. Through these contacts, Haushofer had direct influence on the politics of the Third Reich and was called as "intellectual godfather" of Hitler and Nazi ideology as a whole. The most famous work of Fuhrer "*Mein Kampf*" ("*My Struggle*", 1925) was written under the influence of Haushofer's ideas. Hitler became a symbol of Haushofer's doctrine, which was in fact a dynamic plan rather than an academic theory, aimed at conquest of the pivot area and, consequently, domination of the world [16]. During Hitler's imprisonment, Haushofer was the one who was visiting him every Wednesday afternoon and bringing him political works and sharing the views on new type of German foreign policy. Accumulating the knowledge from the Pan-Germanic literature and German political elite, General Haushofer was sharing this scientific knowledge of the world with Hitler, thus supporting his acts of aggressions and dreams on the conquest of the world. Therefore it is totally wrong to consider Hitler's great undertaking an adventurous act of an amateur [9].

The role and significance of Karl Haushofer is considered to be controversial. Three authors Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Frank Ebeling and Bruno Hippler, who analyzed the personality of Haushofer and his thought, came out with different views on Haushofer's historical importance. If the first two authors in their works "*Karl Haushofer- Life and Works*" (1979) and "*Karl Haushofer and German Geopolitics 1919-1945*" (1994) respectively have tried to "relativize" Haushofer's influence on Hitler and stating that geopolitical teachings were adopted by Hitler in a "parasitic manner", Bruno Hippler in his "*Hitler's Teacher- Karl Haushofer as Father of the Nazi Ideology*" (1996) presented Haushofer as central figure in shaping and developing National-socialist ideology. For him, Haushofer largely formed Hitler's ideology through the mediation of Rudolf Hess (Ibid., 150).

This controversial character of Karl Haushofer's role in the history of Third *Reich* had created a myth around his individuality. This mythical aureola was majorly created by the sonnet "*The Father*" (sonnet 38 of *Moabit Sonnets*), written by his son Albrecht Haushofer, where he expressed the historical role of his father in the form of verses: "The Father"

"A profound fairy tale from the Orient tells us that the spirits of evil power are prisoners in the sea's night sealed by a worried God until once in a thousand years, fortune allows a fisherman to decide who may release the chains, and does not throw his findings back into the sea at once. My father's fate was determined. Once it was in the power of his will to shove the demon back home into his cell. My father broke the seal open. He did not see a touch of evil. He let the demon escape into the world" [17].

Was that "evil" Hitler who instrumentalized the "demon" of geopolitics in order to take a revenge of the dishonorable for Germany Versailles Treaty and achieve his plans of World conquest? Was Karl Haushofer the one, who by developing his political discourse, has released this "*genie from the bottle*"? [11] What were his geopolitical views, which at the end contributed to the "great plans" and massacres committed by the Nazi regime?

Being one of the founders and proponents of the continental geopolitical school Haushofer opposed ideas of Atlantism, in which he saw the expansion of American hegemony in the world. In fact, the ideas of continental unification and continental politics were characteristic of practically all European classical geopoliticians. This idea was put forward as an alternative to the policy of "radical anaconda" developed by the Anglo-American school with the aim of establishing world domination. In order to avoid the suffocating rings of the "anaconda strategy", various variants of geostrategic continental alliances were proposed and numerous theories for the salvation of mankind were developed [18]. According to Haushofer, the decline of the small maritime powers created favorable conditions for the formation of a new European order, in which Germany occupies a dominant position [19]. Haushofer believed that to stop the power of thalassocracy and establish German supremacy, Germany should create block with Soviets and Japan, and accumulate the political, cultural and geopolitical power through the Berlin-Moscow-Tokyo axis. This line, named *Ostorientierung* or "oriented to the East" was considered as an adequate response to the opposite block, especially Britain and France, on which Germany could not count since those had historical claims of a territorial order against Germany. Haushofer's geostrategic activity was aimed at creating a single bloc, where Soviets was seen as Germany's main ally. Soviet Union was assigned the role of a territorial link between Europe and the Pacific coast. An alliance between Berlin and Moscow would provide Germany with transcontinental communications from the Rhine to the Amur and Yangtze, free from Anglo-Saxon influence. Germany would have access to the open ocean and would have the power of both a continental and oceanic power [20].

“Orientation to the East” proposed by Haushofer did not mean the “occupation of Slavic lands”, instead, it should mean the joint efforts of Germany and Soviets to establish New Eurasian Order and to take the region out of influence of thalassocratic states. Thus, the expansion of Lebensraum was to be done not through conquest and aggression, but through development and reorganization of Asian space and lands in Eastern Europe (Ibid.).

However, the ideas of Haushofer did not coincide with the realities of the time and the racist approach to the history followed by Reich leader. For Hitler, racial affiliation was more important than geopolitical objectives. Therefore, the Anglo-Saxon countries were regarded as more close racially, becoming the allies, whereas Slavs and Asian people formed the opposite camp. Moreover, the racial ideas mixed with the anti-communist ideology pushed Germany towards thalassocratic states. Such discrepancy between theory and practice, between geopolitical necessities and National Socialist ideology combined with racism, explain Germany’s ambiguous politics, balancing between thalassocratic, racially proximate West and tellurocratic East based on geopolitical principles, which constituted that genuine Haushofer’s “continental block”. However, since Haushofer has been involved in several political processes and decisions, he was forced to adjust his initial theory in accordance with political specifics of the time, despite the firm convictions that axis Berlin-Rome-Tokyo was just a caricature of the authentic “continental block” [20]. He, as a geopolitician, understood that replacing Moscow, the center of the Heartland, with Rome, the capital of a peninsular minor power, would make the continental bloc weak. Years later, the collapse of the Third Reich confirmed Haushofer's foresight of the catastrophic consequences of the war with Soviets for Germany [21].

Despite inconsistent outcomes of Haushofer geopolitical ideas, he has made his personal contribution to the theory of geopolitics by introducing the concepts of panregionalism and “flexible borders/frontiers”. General Haushofer has divided world into four pan-regions, characterized by political, economic and cultural unity through the influence of Great Powers in the related regions (Figure 1).

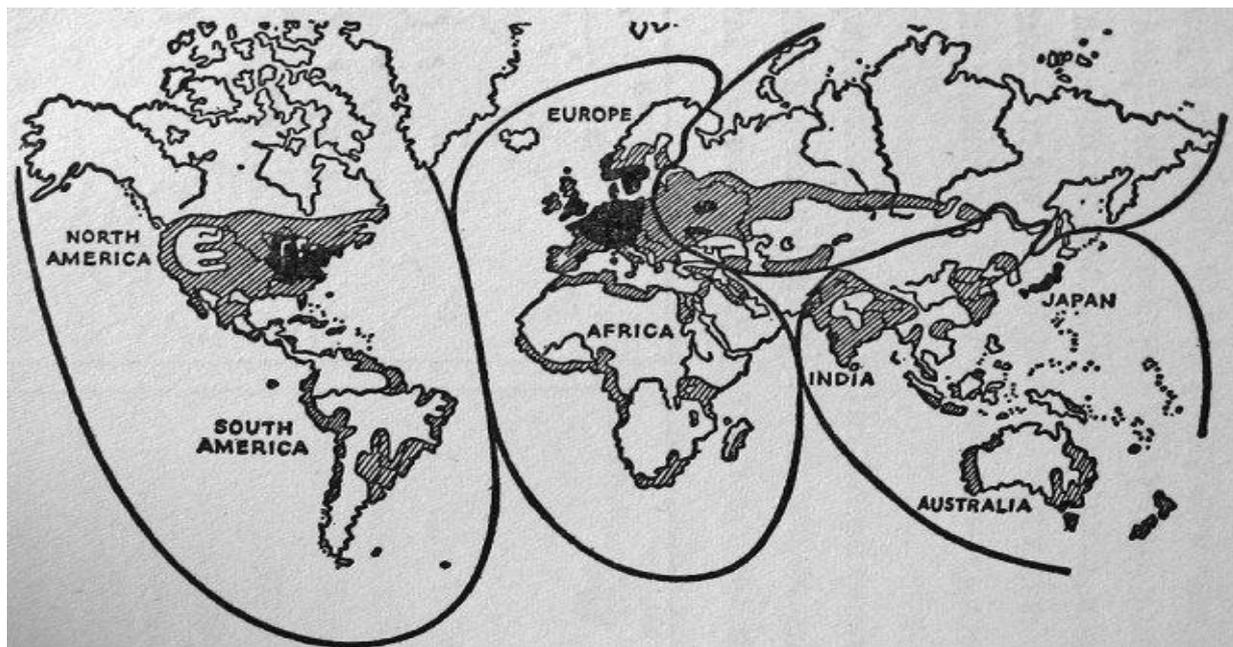


Figure 2. Karl Haushofer’s Vertical System of Pan-Regions

Eric Ross[22], Of Heartlands and Pan-Regions: Mapping the Spheres of Influence of the Great Powers in the Age of World Wars.

In the 1930s there was a turn of geopolitical forces along the meridian line: two geopolitical macrostructures - the East Asian bloc and the Pan American bloc interfered into the geopolitical field of Eurasia, where dynamics performed in latitude platan. Accordingly, Haushofer concluded that it was necessary to divide the world along the meridians. The transition from the traditional latitudinal strategy to the meridional one determined a complete change in the balance of power. Haushofer had drawn his map from the observation that integration processes are more conflict-free along the meridian axis than along the parallel axis. Therefore, it is natural for northern spaces to establish control over southern, as a rule, less developed spaces. This process can be relatively conflict-free. However, when a power tries to expand at the expense of its eastern or western neighbors, it usually causes bloody wars that weaken both sides. Therefore, Haushofer concludes, the world should be integrated into "large spaces" along the North-South axis, and not along the East-West axis. This new geopolitical division of the world has been named pan-regionalism [23].

The pan-regionalist idea was a counterbalance to the current "metropolis-colony" model, which was in decline. Haushofer's pan-regionalism was an interpretation of the concept of global economic regions. Panregions were not only economic blocs. They were based on panideas that linked states based on the common socio-political and economic problems, although in practice, some countries dominated over others.

Those regions in that vertical system of world's division were: Pan-Europe (Mediterranean, Africa, Middle East and Persian Gulf), Pan-America (both North and South Americas), Pan-Russia (including India) and Pan-Pacific, including China, Indonesia and Australia and led by Japan [5]. It is obvious that such division does not reflect the realities of the modern geopolitics, but constitutes a great historical geopolitical model, which helps to understand the geopolitical views in the first decades of last century.

On the other hand, Haushofer cultivated in the German people not only geopolitical feelings, but also a "sense of boundaries". He noted that boundaries cannot be regarded as something forever given, they are living organs that expand and contract like the skin and other protective organs of the human body [24]. Haushofer's idea of "flexible borders/frontiers, contrary to the general view of the period that borders are fixed and naturally determined, claimed that borders were *"temporary halts, breathing spells, for virile nations on the march... Borders were fluid and dynamic"* (Herwig, 9). In a sense this reflects the actuality of today's globalized world.

Obviously, it is not easy to claim either Karl Haushofer could be named as main Nazi regime ideologist or not. Was he in real that influential on Hitler or it was just "parasitic" misuse of concepts to satisfy ambitions? After the defeat of Nazi Germany, in order to save the "reputation" of science in the eyes of the world community, in "The Apology of German Geopolitics" Haushofer tried to prove that his geopolitical theories were distorted by the leadership of the Third Reich and the ideologists of Nazism, since Hitler was a poorly educated person and was not able to correctly understand the principles of geopolitics or misunderstood them [25]. Moreover, he admitted that all of his works written after 1933 were created under pressure from the Nazis [26] and explained that the ultimate goal of geopolitics is to understand the possibilities for the development of a people and their culture on their land and within their living space, in order to be able to prevent conflicts in the future [27]. Fearing the scandalous revelations of their ties with the Nazis during the Nuremberg trials, Karl Haushofer and his wife, Martha, committed double suicide in spring 1946. The suicide note stated: *"No form of state or church funeral, no obituary, no epitaph, or identification on my grave. I want to be forgotten and forgotten"* (Herwig, 1). Isn't it the recognition of the enormity of his guilt? Moreover, his last wish came true. Following the end of WWII, geopolitics was considered as a "Nazi Science", best to be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to argue a lot on the question either General Haushofer was a "daemon" of geopolitics, or one of its prominent thinkers. His personality and ideas are both ambivalent and ambiguous. Over decades giving an evaluation of General Haushofer personality, theory, ideas and deeds it is possible to come to the conclusion that he was a hostage of circumstances and environment, trends of the time and certain, and well-defined line of Nazi politics. He popularized most important concepts of the modern geopolitics and prevented those to fall into oblivion, enriched the collection of geopolitical literature and influenced development of geopolitical models. Despite the wish of Haushofer "to be forgotten and forgotten", up to now he is considered one of the most eminent geopolitical thinkers who laid down the foundation of geopolitics as science and discipline.

REFERENCES

1. Gallaher, C. (2009). *Key Concepts in Political Geography*. London: SAGE Publications.
2. Dikshit, R. D. (2000). *Political Geography: The Spatiality of Politics*, 3rd edition, New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company LTD.
3. Kost, K. (1989). "The Conception of Politics in Political Geography and Geopolitics in Germany until 1945", *Political Geography Quarterly*, 8(4): 369-385.
4. Kjellen, R. (1917). *Der Staat als Lebensform*, Leipzig: Hirzel.
5. Smolen, K. (2012). "Evolution of Geopolitical Schools of Thought", Lublin: Maria Curie – Skłodowska University of Lublin, 5-19.
6. Malic, B. (2017). The Invisible Empire: Introduction to Alexander Dugin's "Foundations of Geopolitics", *Kaliti Tribune*.
7. Mahmutova, A. (2009). German Geopolitical School. *Siberian Academy of Public Service*.
8. Venier, P. (2010). Main Theoretical Currents in Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century, *L'EspacePolitique*, 12: 1-10
9. Wolkersdorfer, G. (1999). "Karl Haushofer and Geopolitics- the History of a German Mythos", *Geopolitics*, 4(3): 145-160.

10. Tikhonravov, Y. (2000). *Geopolitics: Study Guide*. Moscow: INFRA-M.
11. Cahnman, W. J. (1943). "Concepts of Geopolitics", *American Sociological Review*, 8(1): 55-59.
12. Hagan, C. (1942). "Geopolitics", *The Journal of Politics*, 4(4): 478-490.
13. Natter, W. (2003). "Geopolitics in Germany, 1919-1945", *A Companion to Political Geography* (p. 187-204), ed. John Agnew, Katharyne Mitchell, Gerard Toal, Oxford: Blackwell.
14. Gadjiyev, K. (2000). *Introduction to Geopolitics*. Moscow: Logos.
15. Herwig, H. (2016). *The Daemon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer "Educated" Hitler and Hess*. Maryland: [Rowman & Littlefield](#).
16. Herwig, H. (1999). "Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum", *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy* (p. 218-242), ed. Colin S. Gray, Geoffrey Sloan, London, Frank Cass.
17. Haushofer, A. (1978). *Moabit Sonnets*, translated by Herter Norton, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
18. Gasanov, A. (2012). *Geopolitics*. Baku: Zardabi LTD.
19. Gadjiyev, K. (1999). *Introduction to Political Science*. Moscow: Logos.
20. Dugin, A. (2000). *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*. Moscow: Arktogeia.
21. Petrov, V. (2003). *Geopolitics of Russia: Rebirth or Death?*. Moscow: Veche.
22. Ross, E. (2015). Of Heartlands and Pan-Regions: Mapping the Spheres of Influence of the Great Powers in the Age of World Wars. Retrieved from <https://ericrossacademic.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/of-heartlands-and-pan-regions-mapping-the-spheres-of-influence-of-the-great-powers-in-the-age-of-world-wars/> on 01.11.2021.
23. Haushofer, K. (1943). Geopolitische Dy-namik von Meridianen und Parallelen, cited in Alexander Dugin (2000), *The Foundations of Geopolitics* (p. 836-839), Moscow: Arktogeia.
24. Nartov, N. (1999). *Geopolitics*. Moscow: UNITY.
25. Hildebrand, K. (1969). Vom Reich zum Weltreich: Hitler, NSDAP und koloniale Frage, 1919-1945 (p. 77), cited in Hanco Juergens, "On Haushofer, 'An English Translation of Major General Karl Ernst Haushofer's Geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean and Studies in the Relationship Between Geography and History'", *H-German*, 2005.
26. Grabowsky, A. (1960). Raum, Staat und Geschichte. Grundlegung der Geopolitik, cited in Yuriy Tikhonravov, *Geopolitics: Study Guide*. Moscow: INFRA-M, (2000).
27. Paterson, J. H. (1987). German geopolitics reassessed. *Political Geography Quarterly*, 6(2): 107–114.