Hitler’s “thousand-year Reich” existed for little more than a decade, but it has generated an abundant and enduring historical mythology. This typically assumes lurid, and sometimes gruesome, forms. Tales of SS “stud farms,” Nazi submarine bases in Antarctica, Hitler’s possession of the magical spear that pierced Christ’s side, bath soap from rendered human remains, and many more patent falsehoods—often originating in wartime German gossip—remain staples of popular books and websites about the Nazi era. Much painstaking scholarly effort has been devoted to correcting the historical record concerning all these fantasies, but they, and many more, continue to distort conventional accounts of Hitler’s Germany.¹

Popular susceptibility to tall tales about the Nazi state is perhaps unsurprising, given the fanciful quality of some of the regime’s actual projects—dispatching Himalayan expeditions to find the origins of “Aryanism,” for instance.² Persistent distortions about the Nazis are, however, a cause for serious historical concern. By distracting historical memory from specific perpetrators toward generalized and

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glamorized evil, popular mythologizing runs the risk of trivializing Nazi crimes. Other myths—minimizing the Wehrmacht’s involvement in genocide on the Eastern front, for example—have emerged in the service of specific political ends, such as strengthening Western anti-communist solidarity during the Cold War. But mythology of a more scholarly nature, neither sensationalist nor deliberately exculpatory, has also developed around the Hitler state. Accepted historical conventions surrounding the evolution of Hitler’s imperialist ideology, for example, continue to perpetuate a number of myths about the role played by geopolitics, or Geopolitik, and its best-known proponent, General Karl Haushofer (1869–1946). Close examination of the origins and transmission of a central component of these myths—the notorious but non-existent “Institut für Geopolitik”—illustrates the danger that even well-intended misrepresentations can pose to the integrity of the historical record, while illuminating the dynamics of historical production that permit error to become entrenched as legitimate history.

Ever since the very first week of the Second World War, otherwise sound and carefully edited scholarly works have maintained that the retired general Haushofer ran a Nazi think-tank, the Institut für Geopolitik [IfG], at the University of Munich. These works credit Haushofer with introducing Hitler to the concept of Lebensraum and related geopolitical notions, and with convincing Hitler of the need for an aggressive German program of continental expansion. Both Haushofer and his supposed Institut have, through the same decades, been charged with exercising a decisive influence upon Hitler’s wartime strategy, an attribution, as shall be seen, that can in no way be sustained by an objective consideration of the evidence. The result has been to perpetuate in the historical literature both a false representation of the career and influence of Karl Haushofer and, most importantly, a chronic misapprehension of the roots of Hitler’s ideology.

Despite the fact that no establishment called the Institut für Geopolitik ever existed, nor that Haushofer, its alleged director, ever claimed that such an Institut existed, and that there was never any organization that did anything like what such an institute might be supposed to have done, the towering influence of Haushofer’s


5. See below in footnotes 6 to 9.
Institut remains a dutifully cited dogma of Geopolitik and Nazi ideology. And this has been so for more than three generations now. As early as 1944, for example, the Institut was cited in Derwent Whittlesey’s influential and pioneering English-language essay on Haushofer. Although Geopolitik, discredited by its Nazi associations, received little scholarly attention in the immediate aftermath of the war, the legend of the “Institute” persisted through the decades, appearing in the 1970s in standard works like Louis L. Snyder’s Encyclopedia of the Third Reich. The Institut is cited again in reference works and research monographs through the 1980s, for instance in the essay “Geopolitics” in a collection edited by Michael Pacione, and in Geoffrey Parker’s authoritative Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century. It turns up in the last decade in Saul Bernard Cohen’s standard text. And, denoted variously as the “Institute for Geopolitics,” or the “Center for Geopolitics,” or even the “Institute fur Geopolitik,” it lives on today not only in the reputable scholarly literature, but in a host of reference sites on the worldwide web, some of them, like 2010’s sixth edition of the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, otherwise quite reliable sources.

All these allusions to the Institut stand, despite the fact there is no trace of such an establishment in either the catalogs of the Ludwig-Maximilian University at Munich or in Haushofer’s Nachlass at the Federal Archive in Koblenz. The persistence of the Institut across such a wide range of sources is particularly remarkable given the fact that a handful of scholars published doubts about its


existence within a year of the war’s end. So, how did the enduring historical mirage of the Institut originate? Its roots are enmeshed within Haushofer’s interwar career as a geographer and the turbulent political landscape of Weimar and Nazi Germany.

Haushofer rose to prominence as a leading spokesman for the pseudo-scientific theories of geographical determinism that were linked under the name of Geopolitik in 1920s Germany. Born in Munich in 1869, he had served more than three decades in the Bavarian army, retiring in 1918 with the rank of major general. His soldiering inspired a lifelong interest in military geography; after serving from 1908 to 1910 as a general staff military attaché in Japan, a country with which he remained fascinated for the rest of his life, Haushofer began to publish works on the connections between geography and politics. The era’s Anglo-American political geographers, particularly Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) and Halford Mackinder (1861–1947), greatly impressed Haushofer. Mackinder’s “heartland” theories, emphasizing control of the Eurasian landmass as the key to world power, stimulated Haushofer’s subsequent enthusiasm for a Russo-German alliance. Returning to Munich after the war, Haushofer was named Honorarprofessor for geography at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in 1921, joining an illustrious faculty that included names such as world-famous Antarctic explorer Erich von Drygalski (1865–1949).

It is at this juncture in his career, as retired soldier and newly-minted academic geographer, that legends about Haushofer’s activities and connections begin to develop. Haushofer offered regular seminars on geopolitical topics, such as “Defense geography,” but there is no trace of anything like an “Institut” devoted to geopolitics, either in his papers at Koblenz, or in the course listings for the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität at Munich during the period from 1922 to the end of the Second World War. Briefly, in the mid-1930s, Haushofer’s courses are

11. One article noted in July of 1946 that “No trace has yet been found of any large research-intelligence organization under Haushofer’s direction” (Thomas R. Smith and Lloyd D. Black, “German Geography: War Work and Present Status,” Geographical Review 36, 1946, 398–408: 404).

12. The first of a number of books on Japan was Dai Nihon: Betrachtungen über Groß-Japans Wehrkraft, Weltstellung und Zukunft, Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1913.


offered under the heading not of “Geographie,” but of “Wehrwissenschaften,” or “Defense sciences,” but never in association with anything resembling an “Institute for Geopolitics.” And, while he continues to be listed in the faculty through the end of the Second World War, Haushofer is marked as “not reading,” essentially retired, from 1939 on. But he never appears in any kind of affiliation with an institute, noted instead merely as one of several lecturers for geography in the second section of the university’s “philosophical faculty.”

Checking footnote citations carefully can be tedious work, but in trying to unearth the origin of the historical misunderstanding about the Institut, a meticulous examination of the sources is instructive. Not a single English-language work of political geography or history cites primary sources—that is, personal archival research—to document the existence of the Institute. Instead, the earliest sources which appear again and again in the literature about Hitler, Haushofer, Geopolitik, and an “Institute for Geopolitics” are four wartime works, all of which appeared, not coincidentally, in America in the year 1942: Andreas Dorpalen’s World of General Haushofer, Johannes Mattern’s Geopolitik, Hans Weigert’s Generals and Geographers, and Derwent Whittlesey’s German Strategy of World Conquest.16

All these authors were scholars of solid reputation and achievement, widely published before, during, and after the war, and seemingly unimpeachable sources. Dorpalen, a German émigré who became an American citizen in 1942, enjoyed a distinguished career in American academe, publishing extensively on modern Germany throughout a long professional tenure at Ohio State University. Mattern was a noted scholar of German legal history, specializing in the origins of the Weimar constitution. Weigert, another émigré, pursued a successful academic career as a political geographer in Germany before the war, and his work on German geopolitics was the wartime era’s most widely-read treatment of the


subject. Whittlesey was arguably the best qualified of the four to write about geopolitics, a University of Chicago-trained PhD in geography, author during the twenties and thirties of many works on political geography, and consultant to the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, during the war.

Something remarkable happens in each of these oft-cited works, however, if one follows their documentation closely: While providing detailed accounts of the supposed functioning of the “Institute for Geopolitics”, they provide no source citations for the origin of their information, treating their assertions about the Institut as if they are simply well-known and accepted facts for which documentation is unnecessary. Dorpalen’s somewhat florid depiction is typical:

Geopolitik today is a “must” in the education of Germany’s future leaders. In the Geopolitical Institute at Munich they receive the “world-political” training which the leaders of the Kaiser’s Germany were so sadly lacking. At Munich Nazi politicians, diplomats, journalists, and teachers are initiated into Haushofer’s very own world. Here they are familiarized with geopolitical concepts and working methods. World history unfolds before them as an eternal conflict between land-locked continental peoples which are trying to advance onto and across the sea, and seafaring oceanic ones who strive to broaden their hold on the land. . . . On the basis of these factors, the Geopolitical Institute maps its blueprints for world conquest.17

Just as the otherwise well-documented work of Dorpalen cites no authorities or sources for this description, so Whittlesey’s detailed account of the Institut is offered without documentation:

The oldest of the geopolitical organizations is the Institute of Geopolitics at Munich. It is the outgrowth of Karl Haushofer’s seminar and remains under his direction. Its research staff has more than eighty specialists trained in geography, political science, economics, demographics and perhaps other fields. It also draws upon the Association of Workers in Geopolitics (Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft fur Geopolitik), an organization of scholars all over Germany. Agents abroad, probably several hundred of them, contribute to its store of facts about the non-German earth.18

Similar descriptions, claiming a good deal of familiarity with the operation of the Institut on the basis of unnamed sources, were common in the contemporary

topical political literature of the time. The consistency of such references to the Institute—all in the same year, all with some degree of shared detail, and all with no supporting documentation—suggests they might share an origin in common contemporary reports. It suggests, furthermore, that the authors of these writings felt safe in assuming that their readers would be sufficiently familiar with their references to the Institut that these could be treated as common knowledge not requiring documentation. This, in turn, implies that they were relying on a source that they could believe enjoyed a fairly widespread currency.

What might that source have been? A clue is provided by Weigert in *Generals and Geographers*, in the course of which he satirizes an article by journalist Frederic Sondern, Jr., that appeared in June of 1941 in the *Reader’s Digest*. That article, in its turn, was drawn from Sondern’s lengthier piece in the June 1941 edition of *Current History and Forum*, entitled “Hitler’s Scientists: 1,000 Nazi Scientists, Technicians and Spies Are Working under Dr. Karl Haushofer for the Third Reich.” Sondern, described in *Current History* as a “former foreign correspondent in Germany,” and in the *Reader’s Digest* as one whose account is “based not only on the personal knowledge of the writer but on a number of corroborative sources,” was a prolific journalist active in mainstream conservative periodicals from the late thirties through the early sixties. His byline appeared in such mass-circulation venues as *Life*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the biggest of them all, the *Reader’s Digest*, on numerous occasions. Characterized by a breathless, melodramatic style, his pieces bore titles such as “Abdul the Egyptian Learns Yankee Ways,” “Gunmen Don’t Last Long in Columbus,” and “The Brainpower of Hitler’s Army.” Consistent with such a resume, Sondern in 1941 reviewed the triumphal march of German arms across Europe during the previous year, and then painted a diabolical picture of Haushofer and the Institut for his American readers:

> The development of this formula of destruction and the split-second timing which has sent the Nazi juggernaut rolling across Europe without serious

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19. See, for example, the references to the “Geopolitical Institute of the German Academy” in the review essay by Cedric Larson, “Propaganda, Publicity and the War,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 6, 1942, 298–301.


hindrance is the work of one man. Major General Professor Dr. Karl Haushofer and his Geo-Political Institute in Munich with its 1000 scientists, technicians and spies are almost unknown to the public, even in the Reich. But their ideas, their charts, maps, statistics, information and plans have dictated Hitler's moves from the very beginning. Here is an organization for conquest, a machine for scientific planning, which no conqueror before Hitler ever had at his command. Ribbentrop's diplomatic corps, Himmler's Gestapo organization, Goebbels' huge propaganda ministry, Brauchitsch's army and the Party itself are but the instruments of this super-brain of Nazism. But Haushofer's Institute is no mere instrument which Hitler uses. It is the other way round. Dr. Haushofer and his men dominate Hitler's thinking.23

It is not going too far to characterize this account as utter fantasy, quickly exposed by even a casual familiarity with the sources on Haushofer and Hitler. Yet this is only a start, a prelude used by Sondern to establish ever more sensational claims, from alleging that Hitler's early days in Landsberg Prison made him Haushofer's “disciple” to describing the present, June of 1941, when Haushofer, not Hitler, directs German war-making: “The campaigns in Africa and the Balkans started when, and not until, Haushofer was ready and pushed the button.”24 Finally, Sondern names Haushofer as the director of a global espionage network, controlling a cleverly camouflaged web of secret agents working to foment aggression, especially on America's southern borders.

These essays appeared in undocumented popular journals, and it is impossible to know exactly what accounts or information prompted Sondern's story. And yet, dismayingly, it seems to have inspired almost three quarters of a century of misunderstanding. In the works of the wartime authors such as Weigert, Whittlesey, or Dorpalen, this is to some degree understandable: These scholars were perforce dependent upon sources which simply could not be vetted under the prevailing conditions. But the Institut story has endured for decades during which the records were all readily accessible. So, one might wonder, were three generations of Anglo-American historians and geographers (none of these fabrications gained acceptance in the German literature on geopolitics) duped by the freely invented “facts” of one addled, anti-Nazi, free-lance journalist?

24. Ibid.
Perhaps not. A little less than a year before the appearance of Sondern’s popular articles, in October of 1940, the *American Political Science Review* published an article by Charles Kruszewski entitled “Germany’s Lebensraum.”25 Kruszewski served for a time as a US Treasury Representative in Berlin and Frankfurt, and published occasional articles and reviews in *Foreign Affairs*, the *American Political Science Review*, and other venues during the 1940s and 1950s. His 1940 article presents a review of the development and use of the term “Lebensraum” in Germany during the two decades following the Treaty of Versailles, arguing that the concept was the determining ideological force behind German expansion under Hitler.

In describing Hitler’s appropriation of the word “Lebensraum,” Kruszewski explains at some length the development and dissemination of Haushofer’s geopolitical doctrines, and discusses the popularity of concepts derived from *Geopolitik*. He then enumerates a series of governmental agencies founded by the Nazis to promote thinking and planning along geopolitical lines, and, perhaps significantly, employs the word “institute,” in its form as a common noun, several times:

In 1935, there was also established a German governmental institute for spatial research (*Reichsstelle für Raumordnung*). It publishes a monthly journal entitled *Raumforschung und Raumordnung* and studies, plans and supports geopolitical actions undertaken by the Reich. In liquidating the recently conquered Poland, this institute prepared plans sketched by Adolf Hitler in his speech of October 6, 1939, in order “to create for all times peaceful developments in this space.”26

A few pages later, in a discussion of the relationship between Haushofer, Hitler, and their mutual friend Rudolf Hess, Kruszewski describes Hess as “for a time his (Haushofer’s) assistant at his institute for *Geopolitik*.,”27

The word “institute” does not appear as a proper noun in Kruszewski’s article, but it is employed on numerous occasions in conjunction with the word “geopolitics.” Could this account, through conflating the genuine Nazi agency of the *Reichsstelle für Raumordnung* with use of the term “institute” and the discussion of geopolitics in general, combined with some garbling in the transmission, have

26. Ibid., 971.
27. Ibid., 973.
produced Sondern’s portrayal of the “Institute for Geopolitics” with its enormous government-sponsored staff? It is not an implausible conjecture, though impossible to prove conclusively.

Kruszewski, in turn, clearly derived his statements about Hess, Haushofer, and a geopolitical “institute” from a single source, a passing reference in the liberal British periodical *The New Statesman and Nation*. When foreign ministers Ribbentrop and Molotov signed the “Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact” in the last days of August 1939, the *New Statesman* responded in an unsigned article entitled “Hitler’s World Revolution,” inserted in the “Week-end Review” segment of that magazine’s issue of 26 August 1939. The article’s anonymous author contends that the Russo-German pact represents the triumph in Berlin of “heartland” concepts originating with the imperialist geography of Mackinder, which he contends were communicated to Hitler via Hess and Haushofer. In the course of describing Haushofer’s impact upon Hitler’s vision of the international order, the author uses several phrases which were lifted verbatim (and without attribution) by Kruszewski, including the crucial reference to an “Institute”:

His (Haushofer’s) real hour, however, came with Hitler’s accession to power. Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy in the leadership of the Nazi Party, had been Haushofer’s A.D.C. throughout the war and later on for a time his assistant at his institute for “Geopolitik”.

A little more than a year later, Kruszewski used precisely this final clause, in unaltered form, in his own American article, words and ideas that he clearly lifted directly from the anonymous author in the *New Statesman*.

If he was indeed resident in Germany during the 1930s and working as a journalist, there is yet another plausible source for Sondern’s depiction of an “Institute for Geopolitics” as a formally constituted entity. In February 1932, at the instigation of Hess and Nazi agricultural minister Walther Darre, a number of Nazi Party functionaries joined sympathetic academics and journalists to form an “Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Geopolitik” [AfG], or “Work Group for Geopolitics.” Haushofer did at times cooperate with the AfG during the 1930s, and it eventually counted over 500 members who met occasionally and worked in a loosely


coordinated way to produce propagandistic publications. The AfG was one of a number of such portentously named National Socialist-party-media-academic consortia of the volkisch intelligentsia, existing largely on paper and often sharing overlapping membership, which included Haushofer and his journal, the Zeitschrift für Geopolitik [ZfG]. But Haushofer participated with the group only sporadically, never headed it (indeed, he quarreled with its leaders during the mid-1930s), watched as it disintegrated in the first two years of the war, and viewed the body as a dismal failure.

Nonetheless, the AfG was reasonably well-known in Germany during the 1930s. Its leaders also coordinated their work with Haushofer’s magazine, through which the organization maintained contact with a network of foreign correspondents (the “spies” of other accounts?). A number of generally well-founded wartime scholarly treatments of geopolitics, such as those of the political scientist Andrew Gyorgy, subscribed to the notion that the AfG ran a global fifth column of Nazi sympathizers disguised as geopolitical correspondents, and that it was merely one of numerous “mysterious geopolitical laboratories” scattered around Germany. As Gyorgy put it, referencing the “Munich School” of geopolitics,

Although the legend of the thousands of geopolitical scientists, spies and technicians behind Hitler cannot be accepted at its face value, there is no doubt today that the totalitarian “science” played a very significant role in the actual preparation of German military expansion. Unofficial geopolitical observers were stationed in foreign key cities and ports, seemingly harmless

30. Since the mid-1920s, for example, Haushofer and representatives of the Zeitschrift collaborated with the so-called “Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Zeitschriften für die Interesse Grenz- und Auslandsdeutsche,” or “Workgroup of German Journals for the Interest of the Border and Foreign Germans.” Both Haushofer and the magazine played a part in the account of the seventh convention of the group (see Bundesarchiv Koblenz: NL 160 (Pechel): “Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Zeitschriften für die Interesse Grenz- und Auslandsdeutsche,” Streng vertraulich Bericht, 7. Tagung, 29. Mai 1925).


“geographical experts” freely roamed the continents of North and South America, Asia, and Africa, sending detailed reports and carefully designed maps to Munich where they were promptly published in the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*. . . . A few carefully located experts of the Munich School wrote, for example, detailed accounts concerning separatist, anti-British, fifth-columnist movements in various dominions or colonies, mainly in South Africa, North Ireland, Canada, and Hong Kong.34

It is not difficult to see in this account many elements consistent with the more fanciful rendering of Sondern.

There remains one other possible, albeit unlikely, source of the enduring Allied myth of Karl Haushofer’s Munich Institut. In the years from 1921 to 1933, the *Deutsche Hochschule für Politik*, or German University for Politics, a Berlin-based think-tank, offered a series of courses on geopolitical topics.35 The instructor, Adolf Grabowsky (1880–1969), was a conservative, pro-Weimar geographer, journalist, and political scientist, who sometimes listed his courses as part of a “Geopolitical Seminar” but also, in the early 1930s, used the term “Institut” to describe his section of the *Hochschule*’s curriculum. After Grabowsky fled the Nazis for Switzerland in 1934, the University for Politics was absorbed into the University of Berlin and the geopolitical seminar/institute was briefly headed by Karl Haushofer’s son, Albrecht.36 It is difficult to imagine this series of courses at Berlin, headed by Grabowsky and then briefly by Albrecht, somehow becoming the Munich-based Institut under the command of Karl Haushofer, but, given the day’s standards of tabloid journalism, it is not impossible that Albrecht Haushofer’s courses on geopolitics at the University of Berlin, at a minimum, contributed to the myth of the institute.

34. Andrew Gyorgy, “The Geopolitics of War: Total War and Geostrategy,” *The Journal of Politics* 4, 1943, 347–62: 356n. There is no evidence of such a network in Haushofer’s correspondence at the Federal Archive in Koblenz, but Haushofer did at times help publish articles written pseudonymously by German diplomatic personnel. See, for example, his correspondence with Rudolf Pechel from 1931, attempting to place an article written by the German consul in Bangkok under the name “Kalamba na M’Putu” (Bundesarchiv Koblenz: NL 160 (Pechel): 77; Haushofer to Pechel, 29 July 1931).


On the whole, however, the most plausible origin of the imaginary “Institute for Geopolitics” appears to be the passing reference in the New Statesman article of 1939, an account composed under the immediate impact of widespread British shock at the rapprochement of the two erstwhile archenemies, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In different political circumstances, the casual use of the word “institute” might have vanished without evoking the slightest comment. Under the impact of war-time propaganda and post-war recrimination this insignificant allusion—an off-hand observation involving little more than the slipshod application of the term “institute” to, perhaps, mere university class offerings—evolved into the enduring “Institute for Geopolitics.”

Naturally, the myth of Haushofer’s institute was nourished by the eruption of global war five days after the New Statesman’s article. Prior to September 1939, the geopolitical general was known outside of Germany exclusively to professionals in the social sciences. A handful of American geographical and political journals reviewed his writings during the 1930s, and his relationship with Hitler was sometimes noted. But he was unquestionably an obscure figure familiar only to specialists, and there was never reference to an “Institute for Geopolitics” before the onset of the war in the late summer of 1939. In 1935, for example, the Political Science Quarterly reviewed the three-volume collection of geopolitical essays entitled Macht und Erde, edited by Haushofer. The reviewer noted Haushofer’s personal contributions to the collection in polite terms, but mentioned neither an institute nor his relationship with Hitler. A few years later, Public Opinion Quarterly published a critical article that names Haushofer as “Germany’s leading geopolitical theorist,” but without reference to Hitler or to any institutional affiliation.

The war quickly elevated Haushofer and his supposed institute to notoriety, establishing a myth whose persistence illustrates the structural vulnerability to error inherent in the modern historical discourse. For, whatever its origins, which may never be established unambiguously, the mythical nature of the supposed “Institute” has been exposed and conclusively refuted for decades. Such an entity is not mentioned in most of the comprehensive German works on geopolitics in

the post-war era, for instance. And this fact has been recognized by some Anglo-American scholars, as noted earlier, since the first days of the postwar era. Indeed, since the middle of the 1980s, at the latest, a number of scholarly studies in geography and history have been at pains to dispel the myth of the “Institute.” Yet the Institut für Geopolitik remains an apparently ineradicable fixture in the literature on Hitler’s ideology.

The persistent inaccuracy surrounding the “Institute” is symptomatic of a larger, general, and more significant uncertainty about the place of Geopolitik, and particularly of Karl Haushofer, in the formation of Hitler’s war aims. As has been seen, hysterical wartime popularizers—Sondern and others—presented Haushofer as the éminence grise behind all Hitler’s foreign-policy maneuvers, a mastermind who inspired and directed German aggression from behind the scenes. And this wartime narrative inspired the interpretational paradigm which endures, in admittedly less sensational hues, to the present.

The key features of this narrative are simply related. Haushofer met Hitler around the time of his Landsberg imprisonment through Hitler’s follower and Haushofer’s student, Rudolf Hess. The professor instructed Hitler in the nuances of geopolitics thereafter, while he was head of a number of cultural organizations, including the German Academy, the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland (“League for Germandom Abroad”) and supposedly the Institute for Geopolitics. Under Haushofer’s tutelage, Raum (“space”) joined Rasse (“race”) as a leitmotiv of Hitler’s thinking and planning, and guided his moves through the next two decades to the final Götterdämmerung of Germany’s collapse in 1945.

As has been noted, Haushofer’s alleged dominance over Hitler’s thought was sometimes cast in the most categorical terms, during the war, in its immediate aftermath, and for decades later. Consider the words of the US General Counsel

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from 1945, summarizing his analysis of evidence prepared for the Nuremberg trials (which included extensive interrogations, but no indictment, of Haushofer):

Haushofer was Hitler’s intellectual godfather. It was Haushofer, rather than Hess, who wrote *Mein Kampf*. . . . Really, Hitler was largely only a symbol and a rabble-rousing mouthpiece. The intellectual content of which he was the symbol was the doctrine of Haushofer.41

This view persists in some scholarly venues to the present, reflected in more contemporary works, like Bruno Hipler’s *Hitlers Lehrmeister*, which echo wartime accusations that Haushofer, not Hitler, really authored the programmatic passages of *Mein Kampf* while Hitler and Hess took dictation in Landsberg prison.42

There is just sufficient truth in this narrative to keep it on the safe side of parody, and to endow it with the verisimilitude required for incorporation into general literature on the war and Hitler’s ideology. Haushofer was indeed very close to Hess, as shall be seen, and met Hitler at some time in the early 1920s. He was an instrumental figure in the founding of the prestigious German Academy, and became its president under the Nazis, in 1934. He propagandized tirelessly for geopolitical ideas, broadcasting regularly on the radio and flooding Germany with geopolitical books and articles.43 And two key geopolitical terms, “Raum” and “Lebensraum,” do appear more frequently in Hitler’s speeches and writings after 1924, as is particularly evident from chapters 13 and 14 of the second volume of *Mein Kampf*.44

But the devil is in the details, and upon close inspection there is virtually no part of this narrative of Haushoferian malfeasance that is susceptible of conclusive proof. Consider, for example, the controversial question of just when Haushofer actually met Adolf Hitler. Depending upon the particular source one consults in the literature, one might cite evidence that the two met for the first time in any of

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the years 1919, 1920, 1921, or 1922. After the war, Haushofer named the year 1922 (contradicting claims he reportedly made earlier), but Hess’s wife, Ilse, recalled decades later the agitation of her normally brooding and phlegmatic Rudolf in April of 1920 as he enthused over just meeting “the general” at a Sprechabend of the NSDAP. This testimony, too, is contradicted by many others.

The contesting chronologies of Haushofer’s acquaintance with Hitler reflect a historical uncertainty that extends to Haushofer’s alleged role as the tutor who gave Hitler lessons in Geopolitik while the latter composed Mein Kampf from his cell in Landsberg. Haushofer himself, once the Führer came to power, frequently found it expedient to emphasize his supposed proximity to Hitler in the early years, boasting that they had been friends since 1919 and that he had left with Hitler his well-worn personal copy of one of the seminal works of Geopolitik, Friedrich Ratzel’s Politische Geographie, after a visit to Landsberg. But, quite to the contrary of Haushofer’s proud (and opportunistic) assertions, there is no conclusive evidence that Haushofer ever visited Hitler at Landsberg, nor that the two in these years of Bavarian political upheaval stood on any kind of harmonious footing. The most recent German work on the origins of Mein Kampf is refreshingly well-grounded on this matter, and worth citing verbatim:

Thus, the ever-repeated allusions to Haushofer’s visits with Hitler in Landsberg are a complete invention. People were always prepared to stretch Haushofer’s visits to Hess to include Hitler equally. Actually, in none of the available visitor’s lists is it possible to find a reference to Haushofer, which is entirely understandable, since Haushofer, at least in 1924, stood in

45. Matern claims that Haushofer told a friend in the year 1934 that he had been personally acquainted with Hitler since the year 1919 (Matern, “Karl Haushofer,” 110); Bakker says they met in the year 1920 (Bakker, Duitse Geopolitiek, 49n); Jacobsen says that the likeliest date is sometime in July 1921 (Jacobsen, Karl Haushofer, vol. 2, 470); in his memoir, the conservative journalist Rudolf Pechel implied after the war that the year was 1922 (see R. Pechel, Deutscher Widerstand, Zurich: Rentsch, 1947, 277); and Haushofer claimed after the war that the year was 1922, as recounted in Edward A. Walsh, “The Mystery of Haushofer,” Life, 16 September 1946, 106–20.


thorough opposition to Hitler. Rudolf Hess observed in a note of 12 May, 1924 that he believed Haushofer would hate both Hitler and Ludendorff.\textsuperscript{48}

And, in fact, neither the name of Haushofer nor the word “Geopolitik” appear in the turgid opus that emerged from Hitler’s brief imprisonment.

Beyond the use of the term “Lebensraum,” in fact, which seems to appear in Hitler’s argot first with \textit{Mein Kampf}, it is not easy to pinpoint exactly what in Hitler’s thinking originated with the supposed influence of Karl Haushofer. Nearly all the ideas that Hitler postulated as the basis of a Nazi foreign policy during his Weimar-era electoral campaigns after being released from Landsberg, and later in his speeches as Führer, were common currency among Pan-Germans and other imperially minded extreme nationalists since the turn of the century, including the term “Lebensraum” itself. It is important to remember that the term “Lebensraum” was coined decades before Hitler’s political career began, that it was a popular slogan among conservative supporters of German expansion before and during the war, and that it was one with which Hitler was almost certainly familiar before meeting Haushofer.\textsuperscript{49} And Haushofer himself later complained that Hitler never really understood what the term “Lebensraum” meant.\textsuperscript{50} Other rhetorical components of \textit{Geopolitik} common during the 1920s also appeared in Hitler’s public utterances before the supposedly crucial period of imprisonment, such as his oft-repeated demands for \textit{Grund und Boden}—two terms meaning “soil” that were freighted with particular symbolic significance for German \textit{Geopolitik}—as prerequisites to Germany becoming a component of, rather than a threat to, the settlement of Versailles.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Othmar Plöckinger, \textit{Geschichte eines Buches. Adolf Hitlers “Mein Kampf”}, Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002, 145 [Author’s translation].


\textsuperscript{50} Jacobsen, “Auswärtige,” 223.

\textsuperscript{51} See the program elaborated in his speech of 17 April 1923 on the Treaty of Versailles, for example, in Norman H. Baynes, \textit{The Speeches of Adolf Hitler}, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1942, 57. The fact that even at this time matters of race were far more significant in the Nazi view of what constituted a meaningful and effective German foreign policy is pointed out in Mark Mazower, “National Socialism and the Search for International Order,” \textit{Bulletin of the German Historical Institute} 50, 2012, 9–26.
These facts prompt a different estimate of Haushofer’s influence, while additional evidence suggests that the traditional emphasis on Haushofer’s part in educating Hitler about Lebensraum and his relationship to *Mein Kampf* might be misguided. Consider, for example, the striking dissonance between Haushofer’s and Hitler’s perceptions of Russia. Haushofer’s grasp of the central geopolitical principle of the “heartland”—the bulk of the great Eurasian landmass stretching from Germany to Mongolia and beyond, which in the classical geopolitical tradition of Mackinder was the key to world greatness—was never for him a reason for a war of conquest in the east. Quite the reverse. In Haushofer’s view, as he made clear again and again throughout the interwar era, German collaboration and condominium with Russia, to the extent that this would be possible with a state run on Bolshevik principles, was the most promising strategy for revision of the injustice of Versailles and the securing of a sound basis for German power.\(^{52}\)

Such a policy appeared to have been adopted with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939, which so stunned the rest of the world.\(^{53}\) This was seemingly the moment of Haushofer’s great triumph, the zenith of his influence, but it was of course never seriously meant by his supposed mentee Hitler, whose views on this matter could not possibly have been more different from Haushofer’s. And if, despite this profound and fundamental disjuncture in their views on Germany’s proper course in world affairs, Haushofer at the time took pride in the influence he later claimed to have exerted upon the foreign policy passages of *Mein Kampf*, he chose to show it in quite an odd way, never deigning to grant the work a review in his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*.\(^{54}\)

In fact, beyond their commitment to German aggrandizement and the reversal of Versailles—the former a goal shared by every German to the right of center and the latter embraced almost universally across the Weimar political spectrum—it requires some stretch of the imagination to think that Haushofer and Hitler would have had any grounds whatsoever for cordial relations.\(^{55}\) Hoping to overturn the verdict of Versailles and pining for the recovery of German land, colonial

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52. The great enemy for Haushofer was the Anglo-Saxon condominium of the Anglo-American world, and Russia would be Germany’s valued ally in combating this (see Karl Haushofer, “Der Ost-Eurasiatische Zukunftsbloc,” *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* 2, 1925, 81–7).


54. Ibid., 145.

possessions, and population lost during the peace settlement can hardly be construed as evidence of support for National Socialism in the political context of Weimar Germany. Haushofer, while certainly a conservative nationalist, nonetheless affected, and perhaps genuinely felt, a distaste for the sordid and corrosive brutality of Weimar politics. After a brief postwar involvement with rightist groups, and a short-lived connection with the center-right Deutsche Volkspartei, he spurned direct political engagement, cultivating an Olympian detachment from mundane partisan politics which included maintaining a distance from all formal party affiliation, including any with the National Socialists.\textsuperscript{56}

Thus the taciturn, aloof, patrician retired general and the volatile, passionate, plebeian erstwhile corporal were to some extent bound to be estranged both by their substantive views on international relations as well as by their political aesthetics. But a far more fundamental and fateful barrier than differences over foreign policy tactics or Hitler’s brutal political style would naturally have estranged the two men. That was the matter of race. Haushofer was never drawn into Hitler’s racial obsession, for many reasons perhaps, but most obviously because his wife was a Jew. Martha (Mayer-Doss) Haushofer was, in fact, only half Jewish, but that was more than enough for the Nazis, and probably, too, enough for Haushofer never to be entirely comfortable with the National Socialists.\textsuperscript{57} Presumably it did not please Hitler very greatly either. Indeed, not the least remarkable thing about Haushofer’s career (and that of his brilliant albeit doomed son Albrecht) was that, despite their violation of Nazi racial dogma, they were still able to make, for some time, distinguished careers in a Nazified society. This was dependent in part on their position as “Honorary Aryans,” a status secured through the patronage of Haushofer’s devoted Hess, and one which, with Hess’s flight and disgrace in 1941, became increasingly tenuous.\textsuperscript{58}

The conflict between the geographical determinism of Haushofer and other geopoliticians, on the one hand, a determinism often mediated by their attention to cultural and ethnographic factors, and the reductive, deterministic biological racism of Hitler and the most committed of the Nazis, on the other, can hardly be overemphasized, and it was not capable of resolution. Already by the late 1930s, many of Haushofer’s ideas were considered suspect by the hard core of the Nazi


\textsuperscript{58} Jacobsen, ed., \textit{Karl Haushofer}, vol. 1, 170. The Nazi term was \textit{Ehrearier}. 
elite, and he was increasingly marginalized as the war progressed, ultimately witnessing the suppression of his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*—allegedly on grounds of national necessity for the commitment to total war—in 1944.

But even if differences on race and other matters are subtracted from the equation, it is hard to look at many accounts by those who knew Haushofer and not conclude that the world was somewhat taken in by the old man’s boasting about his influence. Only with difficulty, in the first instance, can one imagine Hitler being able to decipher Haushofer’s stifling academic obscurantism, since he both spoke and wrote in a style whose arcane intricacies nearly always crossed the line separating “idiosyncratic” from “incomprehensible”. He was notorious for baffling his auditors and readers. A typically opaque sentence from a Haushofer radio broadcast of 1929, entitled “What Is Geopolitics?, part one,” illustrates the problem. In this excerpt, Haushofer is describing the aims and ideas of the groundbreaking Swedish geopolitician Rudolf Kjellen:

> He wanted thereby to lead the bearer of political education to the conviction that no struggle about the maintenance, distribution and occupation of the powers upon the earth, as the essence of politics carries with it, without constant regard to the earth-given foundations, sustenance- and nutrition-capacity of the ground, its forms, its precipitation, its vegetation and similar life elements may go forward, if it is to have sense and duration guaranteed it. . . . [concluding in a subsequent broadcast,] Thus properly-understood geopolitics is one of the most powerful combat weapons for the just distribution of living and breathing space upon the earth, according to work ability and cultural achievement of peoples, not according to the dictates of violence of a skillfully contrived concern for the maintenance of an unjust distribution of space, which was plotted and wrangled by war and violence.59

It is difficult to imagine Hitler or any other Germans tuning in their radios to trail the old general through these meanderings, and Haushofer’s written expressions of geopolitical principles were no more felicitous. The following daunting passage from an essay called “Geopolitics and the Merchant,” which Haushofer published in 1928 as part of an edited volume entitled *Building Blocks to Geopolitics* (*Bausteine zur Geopolitik*), was intended as part of a popular introduction to the discipline:

59. Bundesarchiv Koblenz: NL 122 (Haushofer), 834: “Was ist Geopolitik?”, “Deutsche Welle” broadcast, 28 May 1929 [Author’s translation].
The more restricted the earth space in which the merchant is economically active, as for example the middle European in comparison with the Atlantic and Pacific economic bodies, precisely so much more valuable for him will be geopolitical schooling, in order to grasp the otherwise incomprehensible intervention and interaction of spatially and economic-spatially far superior foreign economic bodies in the European miniature-economy, and to punctually account for and, with the great and the small but also multiply developed, highly specialized economic aids of his overpopulated and constricted living space, to overcome or at least so enable him to encounter, that this will not at least prematurely come to “the decline of the West.”

As Haushofer’s most thorough and scrupulous biographer has noted, “at the end of his lectures many may have asked themselves, ‘And what, in fact, did he just say[?]’”

Much of his enduring notoriety in connection with Hitlerite imperialism may well be due to Haushofer’s opportunism, which came back to haunt him after the Armageddon when, to his surprise and exasperation, the Allies took the old soldier’s self-promotion and their own journalistic sensationalism seriously. His postwar chagrin and bewilderment were expressed in comments to the American historian Edward A. Walsh during an interview just a few months before Haushofer and Martha committed suicide, in which the now haggard and broken Geopolitiker insisted that he was not in fact of influence, lamented what he saw as Allied exaggeration of his importance, and concluded despairingly, “Ach, and then they complained of my little, so-called Institute of Geopolitics at Munich.”

Ultimately, the Haushofer perpetuated by the inaccuracies of standard popular historiography, the evil genius and geopolitical mastermind behind Nazi aggression—“confidential adviser on foreign policy to Adolf Hitler,” as The Atlantic described him during the war—is exposed upon careful reflection as no more than a caricature, and a badly drawn one. His “Institute” never existed. His constant advocacy of coexistence with the Soviet Union was diametrically opposed to the centerpiece of Hitler’s foreign policy. Placed outside the inner


sanctum of National Socialism by his marriage and his comparatively sane views about “race,” he was helpless to save his beloved son from murder at the hands of his supposed cronies in the National Socialist Party. His efforts at publishing and media manipulation ended in bickering, recrimination, and eventual suppression by the state. He never was close to Hitler and, after quarreling with the Führer at a personal meeting in November of 1938, never met him again.64

What remains is a stately but pottering and slightly pathetic non-entity, the befuddled, avuncular retired serviceman affectionately described as “Old Haushofer” by his students, “a retired Bavarian general of the friendly paternal type who had turned professor” and whose “hobby was geopolitics.” As one of them recalled after the war, “But nothing is more amusing than the idea that the illiterate Hitler embarked on his career of world conquest after having studied Haushofer’s highly abstract and complicated scientific theories about the ‘Heartland Europe,’ etc.”65 Or, as Hess’s wife, Ilse, exclaimed in the 1950s, “the tendentious propaganda of the years after 1945” created the image of the éminence grise Haushofer, and “how inaccurate, how foolish, how false to the very roots is this image!”66

Does such a reconsideration of Haushofer, distanced from Hitler, require his rehabilitation and exculpation? Yes, in part it does, at least to the extent that we retreat from exaggerated notions of Haushofer’s importance in causing the catastrophe that was National Socialist Germany. Much remains, however, that is lamentable in Haushofer’s career and judgment. He was without question an enthusiastic proponent of German territorial expansion at a historical juncture when that clearly could only mean war. He was tireless throughout the 1920s in using his connections to undermine whatever support for the peace settlement may have existed in Germany.67 He certainly militarized German geography as a discipline, introducing his ideas to officers in training at the Kriegsakademie and helping to spawn new “subdisciplines” like “Defense Geography.”68

64. See the account in Heske, “Karl Haushofer,” 142.
67. For examples of his attitudes and activities, including subsidizing anti-Republican geopolitical publications, see Bundesarchiv Koblenz: NL 122 (Haushofer) 896: Dr. Erich Obst, “Aufsatz über Außenpolitik, Sept. 1930,” and ibid., 898: “Bericht über der deutschen Akademie, 7. Mai 1929.”
celebrated the Nazi rise to power, hoped for great things from Hitler’s movement, and worked to justify its foreign policy for some years.\(^{69}\) There is evidence that his publicizing had some effect: Soldiers in 1941, preparing to invade the USSR, recalled being lectured by a fellow who “had read Haushofer, and gave a talk about geopolitics.”\(^ {70}\)

Even the alleged impact of Haushofer’s efforts as legitimator and apologist must be carefully scrutinized, however. Geopolitics was a vaguely defined subdiscipline, but one taken seriously not just in Hitler’s Germany but throughout the West. There is nothing inherently sinister, evil, or Nazified in studying the relationship between geography and fields such as defense or economics, nor is there any way to know who ever listened to those rambling radio broadcasts. He was not, in any case, very widely read. None of his books achieved popular currency, and the circulation of his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, the alleged font of geopolitical propagandizing in interwar Germany which is sometimes credited with spectacularly inflated circulation figures reaching as high as 700,000, in fact peaked in the early 1940s at barely more than one percent of that figure.\(^ {71}\)

A just and historically sound appraisal of Haushofer’s place in the National-Socialist era requires, instead, a substantial diminution of his reputation as an influential academic, and as an admirer of Hitler. His was a career of productive intellectual mediocrity. A thoughtful, if chauvinistic, patriot wounded by German defeat in the Great War, he was willing to go along with and, in its first years, even praise a movement of seeming social conservatism and political nationalism to realize the dream of what he and millions of others believed to be legitimate German national and international restoration. Afterward, a captive of the Allies, estranged from his formerly adoring pupil Hess, and a witness to the ultimate debacle which his career helped unleash, his only response was the classical expedient of suicide.\(^ {72}\) It was not until after the outbreak of hostilities that the

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71. The figure of 700,000 appears in Herwig, “Geopolitik.” But see Richard Wagner’s memorandum from Jacobsen, cited above, which estimates the annual circulation in 1933 at “between 3,000 and 4,000.” Jacobsen, ed., *Karl Haushofer*, vol. 2, 153. Eight years later, in July 1941, at perhaps the peak of Haushofer’s influence, his publisher Kurt Vowinckel (a man in a position to know the truth) claimed the circulation had reached 7,500 (see “Manuskript Kurt Vowinckels,” ibid., 514).

Anglo-American world, which had heretofore treated his work with sober respect (when it noticed this obscure German geographer at all) suddenly discovered that he was actually the subtle mastermind of Nazi aggression. It is not clear that any of Hitler’s ideas or even his rhetoric actually derived from Haushofer’s influence, and it is virtually certain that Hitler would have come by every one of them even if the old man had never existed. Furthermore, as even wartime observers noted, despite its tendencies to nebulous language and pseudo-scientific pretense, Geopolitik actually had some redeeming merit as an approach to analyzing the interaction between geography and human agency. As Col. Herman Beukema put it in his introduction to Dorpalen’s work,

The serious study of Geopolitik does invite one hazard. The human products of an era of sentimentalism in which Fascism and Communism were too often terms of opprobrium rather than fields of scientific investigation, an era in which the connotation of “liberalism” covered the whole gamut from black reaction to do-nothing passivity, will be tempted to place its taboo on Geopolitics. The part played by Geopolitik in laying the foundations for this war, and the philosophical bankruptcy of Geopolitik’s denial of moral forces as a factor in international politics will carry great weight with such sentimentalists. Both vision and courage will be needed of the educators pioneering in a field inseparably linked with the immediate safety and the future welfare of all nations.73

Beukema’s was a fair-minded assessment, one all the more remarkable for its origins during a time of war, from a soldier engaged in that war. His evaluation of the scientific potential of geopolitics reflects a finely tuned sense of intellectual nuance, and may thereby help to explain why mendacious allusions to the Institute for Geopolitics and equally unreliable estimates of Karl Haushofer’s place as Hitler’s foreign policy guru have displayed such remarkable longevity. Appreciation for nuance, as well as sensitivity to minor inaccuracies, are frail intellectual dispositions, often unable to withstand the atmosphere of war. The fact that a few careless references to “institutes” of geopolitical study morphed over time into Haushofer’s storied “Institute for Geopolitics” due to well-meaning journalists like Sondern is perhaps not so surprising.

But what explains the perpetuation of the propagandistic myth for decades after the war ended, when animosities faded and the dust settled? In part, perhaps, the unavoidable inaccuracy that is endemic to the historical endeavor. All inter-

pretations of the past rely to some extent on the work of predecessors, obviously, and some assertions must always be taken on trust. It is simply impossible for any historian to check every footnote and verify the accuracy of every cited secondary source. And so error becomes entrenched and propagates itself through the simple dynamic of historical procreation.

The morbid popular tendency to seek conspiratorial, “behind-the-scenes” explanations for National Socialism probably plays a role in the persistence of these stories as well. But the legend of Haushofer and the Institute for Geopolitics is also a reminder of the seductive allure of simple answers to complex questions. The convoluted, sometimes illogical, often conflicting wellsprings of Hitler’s savage approach to international relations require, at times, laborious and complicated analysis. How convenient and satisfactory it is to be able to elide these tiresome complexities to the influence of a single and simple variable: a reactionary geographer, his “disciples”, and his institute. Born in wartime propaganda’s search for stark contrasts and easily-understood explanations, Haushofer as Hitler’s tutor, along with his mythical institute, have endured.