

The Role of the Scientific Community in the War Crimes of Their States: A Critical Bibliography of Walter Christaller

Dmitry Nikolaenko¹

Editor-in-Chief of Pollution and Diseases.

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of scientific expertise in the operation of aggressive and totalitarian state systems, focusing on a critical examination of Walter Christaller and the scientific community within the Third Reich. The research positions Christaller's central place theory within its historical, institutional, and ideological framework, illustrating how a seemingly abstract spatial model was incorporated into tangible practices of territorial reorganization, administrative planning, and occupation policy. The analysis establishes a structural comparison between the historical case of Nazi Germany and the current state of Russian academic geography, especially regarding Russia's ongoing military actions in Ukraine. The stance of impartiality maintained by specialists operating in authoritarian systems facilitates the conversion of scientific knowledge into a functional element of state violence. Special attention is given to anomalies in the accessibility and circulation of Christaller's original publications. The paper demonstrates that the persistent reliance on secondary interpretations and schematic representations obscures the direct historical linkage between theory and its practical implementation under conditions of occupation and coercion. The bibliography is therefore treated not merely as a reference tool, but as a critical analytical instrument that exposes the continuity between technocratic planning, ideological alignment, and ethical responsibility. The research dismisses the idea that scientific endeavors can be separated from their ethical implications and political and material outcomes. The assertion is that expertise, when integrated into systems of domination and territorial control, represents a form of participation rather than a neutral observation.

¹ Corresponding author dn@pollution-diseases.org

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Key Points

1. *Scientific expertise as a tool of state power.* The paper demonstrates that scientific theories are not neutral abstractions but can be directly integrated into state systems of control, planning, and domination. In the case of Walter Christaller, his central place theory was actively used in territorial reorganization and occupation policies under the Third Reich.
2. *The illusion of scientific neutrality.* A central argument is that claims of neutrality by scientists working within authoritarian or aggressive regimes are fundamentally misleading. By continuing their work within such systems, experts effectively contribute to state violence, even if they do not directly participate in it.
3. *Structural parallels between past and present.* The study draws a direct comparison between Nazi Germany and contemporary Russia, arguing that similar patterns exist in how scientific communities become embedded in state structures and support geopolitical and military objectives. This continuity suggests that the problem is systemic rather than historical.
4. *Bibliography as a critical analytical tool.* The paper treats bibliography not just as a list of sources but as a method of analysis. The limited accessibility of Christaller's original works and reliance on secondary interpretations are shown to obscure the real historical connection between theory and its application in occupation and planning policies.
5. *Ethical responsibility of the scientific community.* The article rejects the idea that science can be separated from its political and ethical consequences. When scientific knowledge is applied within systems of domination, it becomes part of those systems. Therefore, scientists bear responsibility for how their work is used, especially in contexts of war, occupation, and coercion.

Introduction

A scholar may become a war criminal overnight. This is precisely what occurred with a significant segment of the Russian academic community that actively cooperated with the Putin regime. The turning point was February 24, 2022. At 4:00 a.m., the Russian Federation launched a full-scale military aggression against Ukraine. What had previously been described as a regional conflict transformed into an open and comprehensive war.

Russian scholars had been increasingly integrated into the state apparatus since at least 2008. On that early morning, many of them found themselves, objectively and without any immediate personal decision, implicated in war crimes. Their expertise, institutional positions, and analytical frameworks became elements of a broader machinery of aggression.

The Russian academic community has historical predecessors. A strikingly similar case can be found in the scientific community associated with the Third Reich (1-4). This case has been relatively well documented. Given that history has demonstrably repeated itself—and that scholars once again serve an aggressive totalitarian regime with loyalty and technical efficiency—this issue requires renewed and systematic investigation.

There exists an earlier case (the Third Reich and its scientific community) and a contemporary one (Putin's Russia and its academic community).

This study focuses on the case of Walter Christaller and his well-known central place theory. A body of publications exists that directly addresses both the author of the theory and his committed work in service of the Third Reich. These works form the empirical foundation for the present analysis.

Central place theory itself has generated an extensive and diverse literature. It has been interpreted from numerous analytical perspectives. In the 1960s, the theory became a cornerstone of what was then termed the “new” geography—quantitative, theoretical, and model-oriented. During this period, Christaller gained considerable recognition among geographers, and his theory came to be treated almost as a symbol of the new theoretical paradigm.

In contemporary Russia, central place theory has again found a practical application. It has a relatively small but highly active and institutionally influential group of proponents. These individuals are not detached from political realities. On the contrary, they are deeply embedded in the state apparatus of Putin's Russia. Science and practice have merged into a single, coordinated, and aggressive trajectory (5-12).

Russia's aggression against Ukraine represents, in many respects, a repetition of the logic of the Second World War. This is a complex historical phenomenon that will be examined from multiple angles in subsequent essays. For the present purpose, it is sufficient to note that there are strong grounds to believe that central place theory has become an integral component of Russia's contemporary re-colonization and spatial restructuring of occupied Ukrainian territories.

This is an unusual scientific theory. It appears to be particularly attractive to totalitarian regimes. It proves consistently useful in contexts of occupation and territorial control. As such, it constitutes an object deserving the most detailed and critical investigation.

RESULTS

Anomalies in the Bibliography of Walter Christaller's Publications

There is a notable peculiarity in the bibliography of Walter Christaller's works.

Overall, the number of his publications is relatively small—only several dozen items. For the historical period in question, this is entirely typical. The production of large numbers of publications was neither customary nor institutionally incentivized, and there were many reasons for this.

One might reasonably assume that, given the author's prominence and the widespread influence of central place theory, all of his works would be easily accessible and routinely consulted by geographers, spatial planners, service organization specialists, and other experts engaged in applied and theoretical research. In reality, this is not the case.

In the vast majority of instances, references are limited to the 1933 monograph, originally based on Christaller's doctoral dissertation. This book was later reissued in both German and English. It is noteworthy that the English edition is significantly shorter than the German original. Portions of the text were omitted, although the reasons for this remain unclear.

The most striking anomaly concerns the extreme difficulty of accessing Christaller's publications. It is reasonable to assume that only a very small number of specialists have ever physically seen or handled the majority of his works. Central place theory is almost always presented in the form of summaries and secondary interpretations. Standard diagrams illustrating settlement hierarchies and spatial organization are repeatedly reproduced, while direct engagement with the original texts remains rare.

This phenomenon is not limited to English-language scholarship. An almost identical situation exists among Russian-language readers. Numerous secondary accounts of the theory circulate widely. Typically, references are made to the 1966 English-language edition, accompanied by a routine citation of the 1933 German monograph. There is no certainty that the original book was ever widely available in the Soviet Union, nor that it became accessible in later periods.

A detailed examination of these and other anomalies will be presented in subsequent sections. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that the primary reason for the persistent obscurity surrounding many of Christaller's works lies in their integration into the ideological and practical framework of the Third Reich and its postwar territorial planning ambitions.

What followed was a deliberate separation between (a) the abstract theory and (b) its concrete implementation during the Third Reich. It is precisely for this reason that many of Christaller's texts remain difficult to access. They appear to be confined to specialized archival collections and have attracted little contemporary demand. Their close association with Generalplan Ost and its preparatory conceptual apparatus renders them marginal to mainstream geographical theory and of interest primarily to historians with a specific focus on planning, ideology, and occupation.

Ethical Disclaimer

The inclusion and systematic documentation of Walter Christaller's works in this bibliography does not imply neutrality toward their historical application or ideological context. On the contrary, the author's position is explicitly critical.

This bibliography is not an abstract or antiquarian exercise focused on distant historical ideas. Christaller's theoretical contributions were actively embedded in state planning practices that facilitated territorial reorganization, population displacement,

and large-scale human suffering. The ethical problem lies not only in the theory itself, but in the posture of the expert who continues to “do his work” while ignoring the destructive consequences of its implementation.

This issue is not confined to the past. A closely analogous situation is observable in contemporary Russian academic geography. Parts of Ukraine are currently occupied, and these territories are being subjected to spatial planning and territorial “development” according to Russian administrative and ideological standards. As in Christaller’s case, many scholars involved present their activities as technically neutral expertise. Environmental destruction, humanitarian catastrophe, and social disintegration caused by the war are systematically excluded from their analytical frameworks.

The author considers this position ethically unacceptable. Scientific expertise cannot be separated from responsibility when it directly participates in systems of violence, occupation, or dispossession. The claim of professional neutrality under such conditions is itself an ideological act.

Accordingly, this bibliography is presented as a critical instrument. It aims to expose the continuity between historical and contemporary forms of technocratic planning that disregard human, ecological, and social costs, and to reject the notion that scholars bear no responsibility for the real-world consequences of their “purely scientific” work.

Methodological Note on the Bibliography of Walter Christaller’s Works

The present bibliography is constructed according to a deliberately expanded and descriptive bibliographic model. Its primary purpose is not only to provide references, but also to preserve the intellectual, linguistic, and historical integrity of Walter Christaller’s oeuvre.

Initially, the original-language titles are preserved alongside their English translations. This dual-language presentation fulfills multiple methodological purposes. It guarantees precise terminology, avoids semantic distortion that may arise from translation alone, and enables readers with varying language skills to interact directly with the original expressions. Considering the conceptual complexity and ideological nuances of Christaller’s work, depending solely on translated titles would be methodologically inadequate.

Secondly, the bibliography enhances the retention of publication metadata, including the place of publication, publisher, year, volume, issue, pagination, and type of work, such as doctoral dissertation, habilitation thesis, journal article, conference proceedings, monograph, or reprint. The meticulous attention to detail is crucial for historical and critical scholarship, especially when examining the development of concepts across various institutional, political, and publishing contexts.

The list is organized to illustrate the chronological and institutional progression of Christaller’s intellectual journey. Early academic works, state-commissioned research, wartime publications, and postwar theoretical reflections are organized within a

unified framework. This method enables the reader to discern continuities, shifts, and disruptions in Christaller's thought without imposing an artificial division between the "scientific" and "political" stages of his career.

The bibliography clearly recognizes the linguistic and political context of production. The language of the original publication is indicated where applicable. This holds significant relevance for works generated within the institutional context of the German Reich, where spatial theory, settlement geography, and administrative planning were intricately linked to state ideology and territorial policy. The bibliographic form itself serves as an instrument for enhancing critical transparency.

This approach is consistent with the methodological standards typically utilized in the fields of the history of science, intellectual history, critical geography, and archival studies, where bibliographies serve not only as citation tools but also as analytical instruments. The bibliography facilitates reproducibility, accurate source verification, and thorough re-examination of essential texts by maintaining original titles and detailed publication information.

In conclusion, the bibliographic strategy employed in this context is deliberate and based on sound methodology. The aim is to achieve a balance between accessibility for a global audience and adherence to historical sources, thus promoting both analytical precision and interpretive accountability.

***Primary works by Walter Christaller
(German originals with English translations)***

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/ Christaller W. Central Places in Southern Germany: An Economic-Geographical Study of the Regularities Governing the Distribution and Development of Settlements with Urban Functions. Doctoral dissertation. Erlangen; 1932. (In German).

2.

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Conflict of Interest

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