Central Place Theory After 1945 and the Production of Scientific Innocence

Laboratory of Military Ecotones

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A familiar theory and a missing history

Around age 19: I encountered the theory as an elegant spatial model.

At age 69: I examine what that account left outside the frame.

Its relation to settlement development remained a familiar difficulty.

I learned its institutional and political context much later.

The research question

How did wartime planning become an optional part of the theory’s history?

Which professional interests benefited from that separation?

What changes when we restore the populations and institutions?

The source record and our historical interpretation remain distinguishable.

The chronology that the analysis must retain

1932: Christaller completed his dissertation.

1933: Central Places in Southern Germany appeared as a book.

1940–1941: his planning work addressed conquered Eastern territories.

After 1945: geography reconstructed the theory as a disciplinary classic.

Professional work inside Himmler’s apparatus

Christaller worked in the Planning and Soil Department under Konrad Meyer.

The apparatus operated under Himmler’s authority.

Its territorial task included Germanization of conquered areas.

The expert’s contribution concerned settlement and administrative order.

The territory was inhabited

Jewish and other non-German communities already occupied the territory.

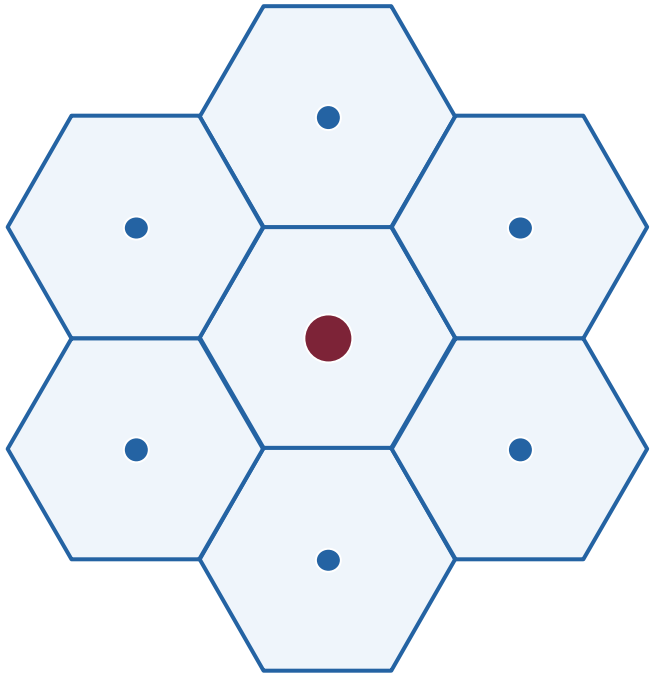
Dispossession, deportation and mass murder destroyed those communities.

German settlement belonged to the same project of territorial domination.

The apparently available surface had a human and political history.

An imposed hierarchy

Hexagonal service areas / schematic



Large dot: higher-order centre
Small dots: lower-order centres

Centres, service areas and functions form an idealized spatial order.

In wartime planning, existing settlement patterns became material for reorganization.

The diagram leaves the rights and histories of existing inhabitants unrepresented.

Original schematic illustration. Textbook reference: P. Haggett, Geography: A Modern Synthesis; Russian edition, 1979.

The planned endpoint: a final stop

The wartime project prescribed an intended territorial order.

That endpoint followed conquest and demographic transformation.

Open historical development differs from installing a prescribed system.

“Final stop” describes the political horizon of this application.

The debate about settlement development

Later researchers tried to connect the canonical model with evolution.

That task requires a reconstruction of the model’s assumptions.

The wartime application aimed to replace an inherited settlement geography.

Historical purpose changes what counts as a meaningful theoretical question.

Post-war geography needed a usable predecessor

The quantitative revolution valued formal models and general spatial laws.

Christaller supplied a recognizable predecessor for theoretical geography.

Diagrams made the theory easy to teach and reproduce.

Canonical accounts separated scientific value from wartime purpose.

An origin story centred on discovery

Christaller’s 1968 retrospective described how he came to the theory.

Its English version circulated in 1972.

A personal discovery narrative could displace institutional history.

The retrospective account needs comparison with contemporary records.

Career priority and scientific responsibility

Professional advancement can continue within a criminal state apparatus.

A career explanation gives no exemption from responsibility.

Post-war recognition can preserve value while detaching participation.

The receiving community’s choices also belong to the investigation.

Why this belongs at this conference

War reorganizes human environments through concrete interventions.

Expert knowledge can make those interventions administratively possible.

Scientific accounts determine which consequences remain visible.

The history of expertise belongs within the history of war’s legacies.

Key takeaways

Professional continuity cannot establish scientific innocence.

Christaller’s wartime planning belongs to the history of the theory.

The prescribed endpoint differs from open settlement development.

Post-war canon formation made political purpose dispensable.

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What did the discipline make irrelevant?

The canonical model survived.
Its political purpose became optional.

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Critical bibliography

Scientific innocence is a product of historical selection.