Geopolitical History and the Causes for the Modern Borders of Germany[1]

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Germany today borders more countries than any other state in Europe, coming in contact with Denmark to the north, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, and France to the west, Switzerland and Austria to the south, and the Czech Republic and Poland to the east.

The lay of German borders is a particularly interesting issue when related to the study of German culture. Not surprisingly, most Americans think of Germany in terms of WWII history while many others place terms for the nation in the realm of its 19th century empire. Both world views bring the defining characteristic of Germans clearly into perspective: their borders.

In 1898, Friedrich Ratzel, the father of geopolitics and of the "organic theory of states," wrote in the preliminary to one of his primary works of German geography and culture: "Above all, the German should know what he has throughout his country. This effort has sprung in the conviction that one can only achieve this end when one can demonstrate how the land and the people belong together" (Ratzel, and Buschick). Over one hundred years later, it is clear that geopolitics, the science of nations and landscapes, has long factored high in the German mindset. It is not the mountains or the valleys or the rivers which define the people; it is their faithful,

passionate, scientific, and probing consideration of their nation's limits which allows us to understand their nature. The science of geography was spearheaded by German scholars and scientists such as Carl Ritter, Alexander von Humboldt, and Friedrich Ratzel (Liulevicius 166). These men and institutions in the 19th century tugged the world behind them to bring geographic science to remarkable heights (Dickinson 64).

To explain modern borders requires a history of the people, outside cultures, and the climate. The Germans did not originate where they now reside. The Teutonics first settled in the region of Jutland that is now modern Denmark and spread their population and language to the rest of Scandinavia. Around five-hundred years B.C., when the climate chilled in the north, making life and agriculture more difficult, the great bulk of the Germanic people migrated south into the present north German plains, a region that had largely gone uncolonized because of the short growing season and the regular flooding of the rivers. They continued southward, displacing the Celts who resided there, and eventually peopled the region of *Mitteleuropa* that now constitutes Germany and the outlying Germanic areas (Jordan-Bychkov and Jordan 124). Their population spread through middle Europe, from the northern seas down into the areas of Rome, west into modern France, and east into Slavic lands. These are all areas that they would continue to people in growing or shrinking numbers, still speaking Germanic languages, to the present day (126).
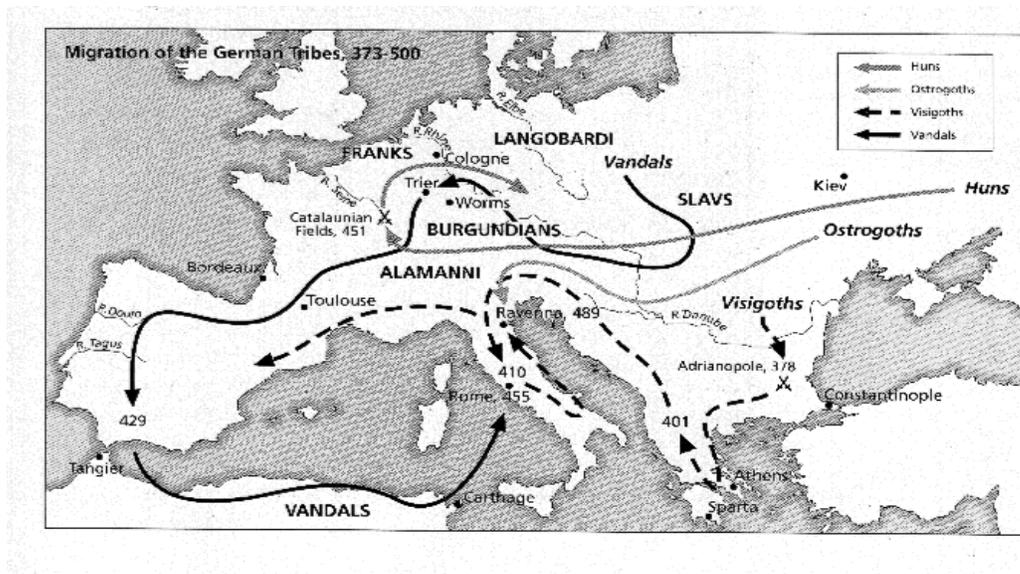
Fig.1. This map shows the migration of the German Tribes between 373-500 A.D (Samuelsen).

The history of the Germanic people, from their initial settlement to the first unions, was a long and disunited period. Contrasting with the concept most have of Germany as a united Federation with single purpose and national interests, a country did not even exist before the 19th century. The German populations existed as principalities and confederations with individual rulers and customs, their own trade and economies, and, most interestingly, their own borders and perspectives. From the primeval period, through the Roman occupations and settlements, into the Dark Ages and the medieval times, the Germanic separations passed from tribes to *länder*, but remained disconnected realms with only the barest unifying ties to the end of the 18th century (Sime and Freeman 16-20). The dissolution of the last vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire at the hands of the French opened up new concepts of German solidarity, but it was not until the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte that Germany, roughly as we know it, first came into being. In 1815, thirty-nine states joined into the German Confederation, taking in for the first time the free towns of *Lübeck*, *Hamburg*, *Bremen*, and *Frankfurt* (219). From that point came the formation of the nation of Germany itself, and thus the borders for which this essay concerns
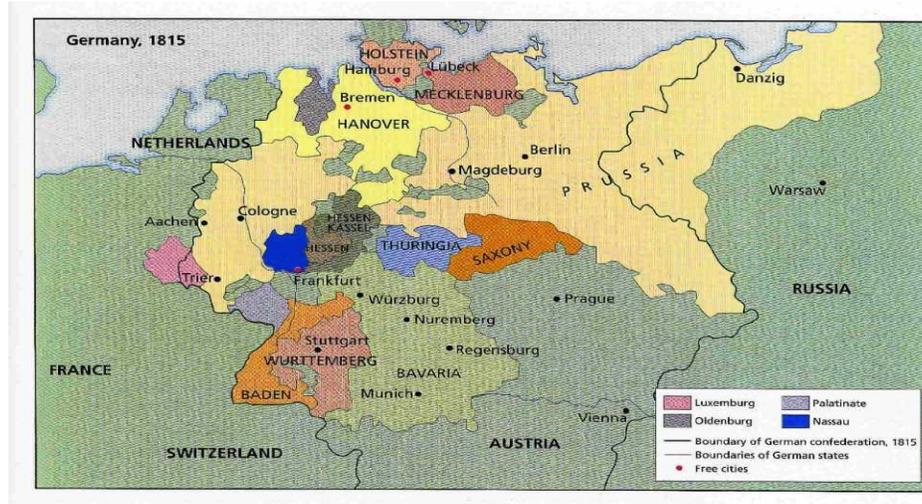
itself.

Fig.2. This map shows the members of German Confederation (Samuelsen).

Physical geography has been historically emphasized as a major factor creating nations, and topography has naturally played perhaps the biggest role in the lay of the country of Germany. The northern border comes to the North and the Baltic Seas. The western border traveling south with the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Belgium is not an obvious geographic one, snaking through farmlands and flat plains until joining with the Rhine to form the border with France and then Switzerland, bending to the east to make the Swiss northern border. The joining of Austria, Switzerland and Germany occurs at the *Bodensee,* two large fresh water lakes that are fed by the Rhine. The border then winds through mountain peaks on the edge of the Alps, separating Germany from Austria, and briefly joining with the river Inn before turning northward. The border continues to wind through enormous mountain peaks, steadily trailing northward and then joining with the river Saalach, which joins with the river Salzach and goes north to join the Danube. There the border briefly follows the Danube east before once more turning northward – and then west – to form the border with the Czech Republic, loosely designated through hills and valleys around the outskirts of the Bavarian forest. The border then

returns east to meet the Neiße and turns sharply north siding Poland, flowing over declining hill

lands to meet the Oder River then to empty into the Baltic Sea.

Fig.3. This is the map of modern Germany ("Map of Germany").

The borders of Germany, as are all borders, are political designations. They each carry

different histories behind their placement along with different ethnic and cultural hearths. The

major separator between these nations is language, a division that without the borders themselves

would naturally divide the people. However, several of them are with countries that speak

German themselves, and with which an outsider would find little obvious reason for their

separation. To find the answers, one must once more look to history.

An easy starting point to observe the political divisions of the Germanic areas is from the

later period of the Holy Roman Empire, which included the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg,

Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. The unique histories that came to these

Germanic populated areas, leading to the dissolution of the Empire, laid the grounds for their

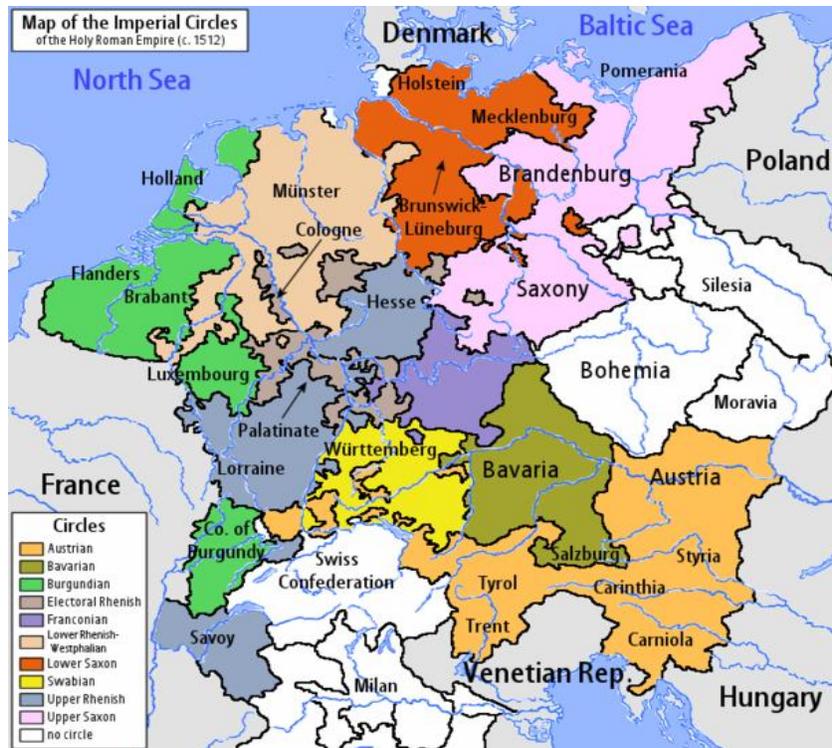modern divisions (Barbour and Stevenson 36).

Fig.4. This map shows the imperial circles of the Holy Roman Empire (c. 1512) ("Map of

Imperial Circles")

In the case of the Netherlands and Switzerland, language began with a German cultural

hearth, but in time divergent languages became both a sign of growing separation and,

particularly in the case of the Netherlands, eventually a cause for real political separation. While

the Netherlands have diverged much further linguistically, both borders merely grade from one

country to the next in true geography and speech. Yet their cultures identify with one official

language separate from German, and the character of the countries derives in large part from

their languages (Wardhaugh 31).

The Netherlands, as part of the Western Germanic area, are unique in the Germanic

region. They were much earlier separated from their associated states by an early division of

language, namely Middle Dutch, and the invasion of Spain in the middle 16th century which

effectively cut the state off from the Germanic empire. They were further isolated from other

Germanic states by the adoption of Protestantism in the wake of the reformation. Finally, a revolt against Spain and the subsequent establishment of an independent state, which quickly became one of the most prosperous in Europe, gave no incentive to the Netherlands to attempt to adopt the rising codified German language over a codified Dutch while Germany was still a disunited group (Barbour and Stevenson 40). Thus, their separation from the German speaking core was early and grew wide.

Switzerland's historical division is much less easy to categorize. They sat on the western realm of the Holy Roman Empire and early experienced a growing merchant class which gave people and towns ambition to rise from beneath feudal overlords. The response to this condition, beginning in the 13th century, was the formation of confederations of independent towns and even of rural regions, organized to protect their common interests (Adams and Cunningham 1-6). That the Swiss confederation grew to be an independent state is somewhat remarkable. Its status on the periphery of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as its Alpine terrain, kept the Swiss confederation defended from outside invasion and also promoted a general isolation. The Habsburg family, being originally from Switzerland, and remaining the most significant feudal lords in that country, created a situation where independence from Swiss lords also could have necessitated independence from the empire itself (Barbour and Stevenson 29). Whatever the ultimate cause of Switzerland's independence from its neighboring Germanic principalities, it is notable that language never held the same significance as it did in the Netherlands. Swiss German is still comprehensible by other German speakers though its distinctiveness is a point of national pride for the Swiss. It is also notable that the Swiss Confederation did not include non-Germanic speaking states until 1804 (Adams and Cunningham 2).

Austria is yet another interesting division from Germany. Austria is predominantly

German speaking and has long been populated by Germanic people and been a related Germanic entity. The western territory, particularly, passed into other German states' control and back again (Stiles 7). Several times the Austrian state came near unification with Germany, particularly at the time of Germany's early attempts at union, but for political and cultural reasons they remained separate. During the time of the first German confederation, Austria played the part of one of the greatest powers contending for control of the union (Taylor and Wrigley 57-58). Linguistically, there is little separation except for the presence of non-Germanic languages in parts of Austria. One can, as in the case of Switzerland, point to the topography as a major factor in the historical division between the two states. Physical location may possibly play the primary role in Austria's history, including its trade with and proximity to the east, as a unique Germanic country (Stiles 1-2).

North from Austria one looks to the Czech Republic and a people very different from the Germanics. From the *Course of German History* Taylor and Wrigley remark of the time of the 1815 German Confederation:

> The Czech people, who made up the majority of the inhabitants of Bohemia, had been for two hundred years without a national culture or territorial upper class; they were a people lost to history, and it was easy to assume that the German inhabitants of Prague or Brünn made up Bohemia. (47)

The story of the German east border lands can be defined by the movements and political aspirations of the German and Slavonic people residing in the middle. Germanic and Slavic migration, east and west, continued over a thousand years. Neither took complete cultural control over those areas until relatively recent times. This caused the great disputes and political crises that have arisen along this border in modern and ancient times (Bell and Bell-Fialkoff 38-41).

The Czech people are a Slavic group that occupied Bohemia around the 6th century. They migrated into central Germanic land over the Elbe river, settling towns and homesteads far west (145-146). By 1815, a growing sense of nationalism arose that had remained dormant through the centuries while the Czechs had remained a part of the German empire. By 1848, great upheavals had been undertaken by Czechs, and tensions between them and the German population were high. The German Confederation had hopes to bring the Bohemian area into a united Germany, but military victory by the Habsburgs solidified Czech status within the Austrian Empire (Taylor and Wrigley 83-84). Independence as a Slavic state did not come about until 1918 with the end of the Austrian Empire.

Finally, along the way looking north to the Baltic Sea is the border with Poland, a separation that is not historically sharply defined by any natural landmarks, but one that grew and shrank over the past two centuries with remarkable swiftness and growth or loss of land. The present border along the Oder-Neiße line was designated after World War II, but the history of the region and their relations goes back much farther. Much like the Bohemian area, the Slavic migrations into Poland began over fifteen-hundred years ago and have, for that time, interacted with the Germanic populations who were also colonizing this eastern rim of middle Europe (Dominian 136-137). Unlike Bohemia, Poland never came under the Holy Roman Empire, even as an elector state. In the 13th century, the region experienced significant economic growth, and as a result many workers came into the area, a vast number of them German. They founded towns and organized under new laws designed to propagate the growth (Wandycz 3-4).

Southern Polish cities were devastated in 1241 by Mongol invasions, and the same century saw the Teutonic Knights conquer what became known as East Prussia, which would grow into the German power of Prussia. This northern country, always trying to hold itself

together politically, would play an enormous role in later history. In the following century Pomerania and Danzig were captured and colonized by the Teutonic Knights, thus cutting Poland off from access to the Baltic Sea (4-8). German influence in the region was growing and made its mark.

The border must be seen through the back and forth gains of land between Prussia (as it would become the dominant power of the "Lesser Germany" confederation) and Poland. It was Prussia's power that had greatly molded the German Confederation, and coming to the 20th century and the devastation upon all of Europe in World War I, it was Prussia's division from northern Germany that laid the borders that would be ultimately decided after World War II (De Zayas xxiii - xxiv). The declaration of the Polish border on the Oder-Neiße line was farther west than the German political border had before been pushed, but it was only one instance in a long line of outward and inward growth of that border (41).

Germanic presence and contribution to European and world accomplishments cannot be denied. There is a common tendency today to regard Germany, and the Germanic population outlay, in terms of blind geographic expansion. This perception disregards the wider history of the Germanic people and of the whole of Europe; a history that is filled with the twists and turns of the ages that have made the story of the West. Their industriousness and creativity gave the world much; and their history in many respects is the history of Europe itself. As is said by Taylor & Wrigley in the *Course of German History*:

> The Germans are the people of the north European plain, the people without a
> defined natural frontier. Without the sharp limit of mountain ranges, except at the
> Alps and the Bohemian mountains, the great plain is intersected by four great
> rivers (Rhine, Elbe, Oder, Vistula), dividing lines sharp enough to split the

German people up amongst themselves, not rigid enough to confine them within

settled frontiers. There is no determined geographic point for German expansion,

equally none for German contraction; and, in the course of a thousand years,

geographic Germany has gone out and in like a concertina. At times Germany has

been confined within the Rhine and the Elbe; at others it has blown itself out to

the Pyrenees and to the Caucasus. Every German frontier is artificial, therefore

impermanent; that is the permanence of German geography. (2)

The role the German people have played in developing middle Europe has given much in

philosophy, music, science, and a realm of thought leading to a more aware world. Their

population movement and contributions did not stop in the middle region of Europe. According

to the *German American Family Album* by Hoobler, over seven million Germans have

immigrated to America since 1683, today making up the largest single ethnic group in the United

States. The same story of immigration is true in many places of the world: South America to

South Africa, Australia, and many of the farthest regions of the world where they have brought

their inventiveness and their curiosity.

The people whom we know as the Germans have a long and introspective and important

history. They have, since the very earliest times, pondered upon themselves and their place in the

world (this in turn has given the world much contemplative philosophy). When Friedrich Ratzel

and the other giants in the field of geopolitics looked into the landscape of their country to find

what made it be, they found their own people at the core. It was not topography that limited

them. As is noted by Liulevicius, Ratzel, the father of political geography, sought cause and

purpose in the land and came to the conclusion that it was the people who made both:

As Germans in ever-growing numbers bound themselves ever more tightly with

their soil, an entirely new landscape emerged, which is full of the signs of the

work which a people clears, digs in, and plants into its soil. (167)

It was not just for the sake of better farming techniques that the Germans looked to their

land for their purpose. Being a people that for all time were in contact, and conflict, with many

neighboring tribes, principalities, and countries, the Germans became a people who learned to

define themselves by their own piece of earth and the culture that they created there. Likewise,

their achievements, defeats, and inventiveness became just as interconnected with their space.

Germans are often portrayed, and sometimes caricatured, as absurd or even malicious,

but they are a unique people with an incredible history. It is one that persists and promises to go

into the future and along the way to show the world their further achievements and thoughts. The

world would be sorely lacking to proceed without them.

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