

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia Geographica V (2014)

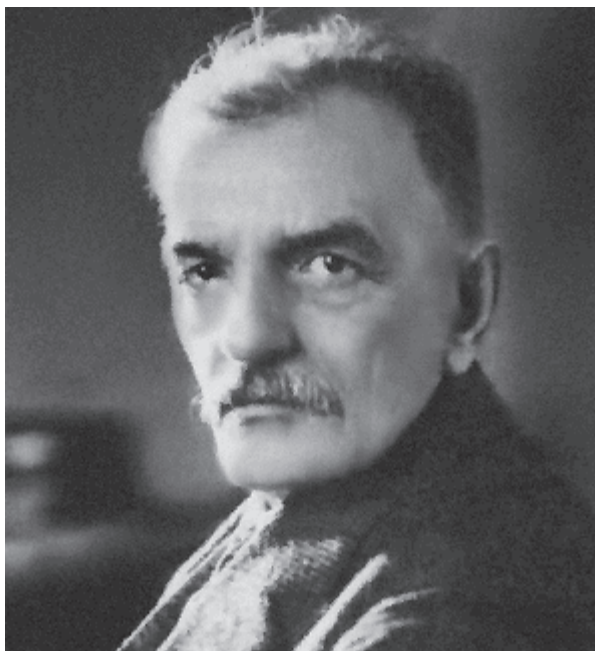
Witold Wilczyński

Human geographical ideas of Eugeniusz Romer

Abstract

Eugeniusz Romer's contribution to the development of Polish geography has been extensively appreciated. Historians of geography emphasized however his contribution in the field of physical geography and map making. Meanwhile, Romer's human geographical concepts seem to be no less original and valuable. One of the most popular ones is the geopolitical controversy between Romer and Waław Nałkowski concerning the individual character of Polish lands. This broadly commented dispute has been showed as an example of logomachy. On the other hand, the geopolitical concept of Romer, despite the passage of 60 years since his death, should create the basis for a discussion concerning the international position of Poland.

Key words: Eugeniusz Romer; geopolitics; human geography; Poland



Fot. 1. Eugeniusz Romer

Source: own source

Eugeniusz Romer (1871–1954) is believed to be the greatest personage in the entire history of Polish geography. A student of Eugen Oberhummer, Alfred Kirchoff, Albrecht Penck, and Ferdinand von Richthofen, and professor at the Jan Kazimierz University of Lwów from 1911, and at the Jagiellonian University from 1946. Romer was also the founder of the Cartographical Institute in Lwów and the author of many maps and atlases, which became the prototype for many authors, both Polish and foreign alike. Many of the cartographical conventions used to this day were thought of and developed by Romer and his co-workers. Romer also traveled extensively to the Far East and to the Cordilleras of North America. As a professor he left behind the great volume of works as well as large gathering of students, known as the “Romerides’ generation”. They took responsibility for the development of geography in Poland in the period after World War II.

The literature on Romer and his scientific achievements is quite extensive. The majority of it emphasizes his contribution in the field of cartography and physical geography, especially climatology. He formulated the foundations for climatic geomorphology in 1899, and the morphogenetic model which equaled the famous theories of William M. Davis and Albrecht Penck. Quite less has been written about his work in human geography and, on the other hand his contribution to the methodological debate was ignored. For many years those who were involved in historical research were arguing about Romer’s lack of interest in the philosophy of geography. Instead, they concluded that Romer was strongly engaged in purely empirical and specialistic research. This should be interpreted as a manifestation of the tendency to idealize the scientific approach in the history of geography (Wilczyński 2011, pp. 42–43). A very different set of Romer’s scientific interest is displayed in an almost unknown publication from 1969, under the title *“Historical and Philosophical Discourses on the Subject of Geography”*, compiled and published by August Zierhoffer, one of Romer’s students (Romer, 1969). This work contains basically the lectures of Romer which he was to deliver at the Jan Kazimierz University for the academic year of 1918–1919. The efforts of August Zierhoffer that led to the publication of Romer’s work, however, was neither truly appreciated nor exploited. Historical and philosophical issues such as the problem of the essence of geography, were not very popular at the time among Polish geographers, who were interested mostly in the purely natural and economic topics and in research conducted under the guidance of scientific methodological conventions. In these circumstances, the publication of Romer’s work, which to this day remains quite unknown, must be regarded as an exceptional and unprecedented event.

The opportunity to change this unfavorable situation appeared in connection with preparations for the IGU Regional Conference in Kraków in 2014. The Consortium that is preparing this important event decided to release a special historical publication aimed to promote the Polish classical geography abroad. As intended, this publication was to contain concepts of the main founders of Polish

geography¹. The above-mentioned work of Romer happened to be one of the most important sources used. It is worth noting that the planned IGU Regional Conference will be the first geographical event of this magnitude in Poland since 1934, when the IGU Congress took place in Warsaw, the main initiator and co-organizer of which was Eugeniusz Romer.

Eugeniusz Romer is a monumental figure in Polish science. Despite the passage of 60 years since his death, his name is still surrounded by an aura of extraordinary nobility and mystery. This nobility comes from his huge achievements, both in academic and in the field of socio-political activity. These achievements gave him great authority among scientific circles in Poland and abroad. In spite of the fact that Romer avoided political involvement he has become a very influential person. As an expert of the Polish delegation at the peace conferences in Paris and Riga, he was primarily responsible for the shape of the borders of the Polish state (born anew after 123 years of partition), after World War I, and after winning the bloody war of 1920 against the Soviet Union².

In turn, the mysterious character of Eugeniusz Romer is probably due to the fact that for many years after his death, his memoirs and diaries were not published, and the studies devoted to his achievements and career explicitly avoided certain topics. Up to this day no publication concerning the characterization and interpretation of Romer's works in the field of human geography appeared, although even if fifty years ago this need was demonstrated³. In these circumstances, for researchers who do not comprehend the vast Romer's interests and characteristics of his mentality, his great achievements may seem amazing and difficult to understand. It is because his achievements were not understandable in the light of the works showing Romer as a follower of empirical and mathematical methods only, who avoided philosophical considerations and theoretical discussions⁴. The truth about many events in the life of Romer and about his views on the nature of geography was revealed no earlier than in the mentioned 1969 publication edited by A. Zierhoffer. New light on Romer's personality was shed by the records of Romer's whereabouts and activities at the Paris Peace Conference. This has been released thanks to the efforts of historians in

¹ I mean the publication entitled "*A Source Book of the Polish Classical Geography*", edited as the second volume of the "Lelevel Society" Research Group (Wilczyński, 2012).

² The report of Romer from the Paris Peace Conference contains *Pamiętnik Paryski (Paris Diary)*, published for the first time in 1989 (second edition: Romer, 2010).

³ In spite of the fact that geographical institutes or faculties exist at some fourteen Polish universities, we have no one official division dealing with the history and philosophy of geography. An attempt to fill this gap was the establishment of the "Lelevel Society" Research Group in 2009. During the Fourth Special Session of the Group in 2011, the most important ideas of Waław Nałkowski were discussed and their value was assessed from the point of view of contemporary scientific and philosophical ideas. Nevertheless the volume which has been edited as an effect of the session remains quite unknown (Wilczyński, 2011a).

⁴ Such was the way of presentation of Romer's scientific profile during the IGU Commission on the History of Geographical Thought Symposium in Utrecht in 1991. The author of the presentation was J. Babicz.

the late 1980's (Romer, 2010). The true character of Eugeniusz Romer was revealed by his *"Memoirs"* with significant subtitle *"Problems of conscience and faith"*, written in the last years of his life, and published only in 1988 (Romer, 1988). They show a profound spiritual evolution of Romer and are an expression of his inner need to describe the experienced grace of conversion. These *"Memoirs"* later became the basis for the analysis, aimed at the investigation of the factors that determined the radical returning to God in the last dozen years of Romer's life (Misiniec, 1998).

The only human geographical problem derived from the works of Romer, which has been broadly discussed in the literature, is his geopolitical dispute with Waław Nałkowski. This great founder of Polish geography published the doctrine of the transitional nature of Polish territory in 1887. This publication became the reason of the controversy, which has never been resolved ultimately. Nałkowski believed that the Polish lands are transitional and undefined, mainly due to the physiographic conditions. In a deterministic manner he deduced then, that the transitional nature and indefinableness of Polish lands make a threat to the existence of the state and the nation, or a handicap in its development. He wrote:

Poland is a shallow dike that remained after rinsing the political sandbank which the waves are trying to deepen. The flat shape of the surface does not provide the shelter for small nations and states, the necessary geographical point of support. In this infinite, flat, transition area, the international struggle for existence takes place with great fierceness [...] Nations which are weaker, less persistent are bound to disappear as islands of soft earthy masses under the constant onslaught of waves in the ocean (Nałkowski, 1887: 601–603).

This view, characterized by the strong determinism, was formulated in the most difficult period for Polish culture, and was an expression of defeatism that gripped the minds of a large part of the Polish intelligentsia in the Russian sector of partitioned Poland after the failure of the January National Uprising (1863–64). In the next paragraphs however this determinism was essentially alleviated. Namely Nałkowski ascertained that *"on the plains without natural limits the ethnographic boundaries can be shaped only by way of hard work"* (Nałkowski, 1880: 650). The doctrine of transitional character and the indefinableness of Polish lands has been formulated by Nałkowski again in the last years of his life and published after his untimely death (Nałkowski, 1912). The meaning of the doctrine, however, was significantly revised.

The doctrine of transitional character of Polish lands has been effectively utilized by foreign scholars, especially in Germany. German geographers generally denied the thesis that Poland possessed any traits of geographical individuality. For them, the boundary between Eastern Europe and Western Europe ran across the Polish lands, or they placed Poland in what was referred to as "transitional" Europe (germ. *Zwischeneuropa*), which had no defined boundaries and where the features of the East and West overlapped. Moreover in use among those of the German school was the concept of a "Central Europe" (*Mittleuropa*), which were to be controlled by Germany, and where there was no place for free-standing units such as Poland.

Transitionality of Polish lands from west to east which was identified as the main feature of the country (*qualité maîtresse*) has been shown as the essence of Polish territory treated as a geographical unit. It should be noted that Nałkowski (probably influenced by discussions with Romer), essentially changed his view of the importance of geographical transitionality. Unless he previously stated that this is a feature which effectively hinders the development of the nation and the state, he then saw the transitionality as the characteristic which does individualize the historical Polish territory.

While agreeing with the thesis of the transitional nature of the Polish lands, Romer understood this concept only in the physiographic sense:

The transitionality of Poland between East and West, I have always considered as a problem analogous to the problem of the eastern steppe flora for which the entire space of Europe [...] may be considered as a land of transition [...] So, also Poland can be called a land of transition (Romer, 1946: 3).

However, he vividly objected to Nałkowski's idea, that the transitionality could be a basis for Poland's geographical individuality. He showed to be unable to imagine that transitionality, or indefinableness, can be the basis for determining the geographical nature of country. According to his logic, indefinableness could not be a source of a definition. On the contrary, he believed that Poland is not a physiographic individuality, but a cultural one, since he believed that the crucial role in shaping the country's geographic character belongs to humans and human activities. While you can say that in terms of climate and flora, Poland includes the eastern and western features in certain proportions and, therefore, is a land of transition, it is no longer transitional in terms of people and their typical way of handling with the land and with other people. And the latter terms are decisive from the point of view of the country's geographical individuality definition. The Commonwealth of Poland is a country belonging entirely to Western civilization, and, since the thirteenth century, it constitutes its easternmost outpost. In examining the socio-cultural phenomena of the pre-war Polish provinces (based on a sample of almost 5000 individuals) Romer demonstrated that the differences between urban and rural areas are much more essential than the differences between individual, western and eastern provinces. Moreover, he showed a lack of incremental differences in intensity of socio-cultural phenomena in the east-west direction. So then, the examination of the Polish people themselves lends no support to the doctrine of "transitional character" of Poland.

The vivid opposition of Romer to the doctrine of transitionality as the basis of geographical individuality means that he was aware of the need that the national territory (state) should be defined in inherently natural terms, and this definition is the task of geography. At present, issues of this kind are recognized as a part of geopolitics. In addition, Romer's opposition to the principle of transitionality was the result of his fears for the future of the Polish Commonwealth, exposed to pressures from foreign cultures. These fears could have their sources in Romer's personal observation of negative manifestations of acculturation processes or of diffusion of

German culture, and especially Russian culture among Polish communities. Scientific justification for such fears emerged with the basics of the science of civilization, formulated by Feliks Koneczny only in the thirties of the last century. Koneczny indicated, *inter alia*, the negative effects of the mixing of cultures belonging to different civilizations. Here are grounds for finding that Romer contacted Koneczny during the years of World War I, but there is no documentary evidence of cooperation between the two researchers⁵. Topics concerning civilization were undoubtedly very close to Romer, as is clear from his knowledge of the current French geographical literature (publications by P. Vidal de la Blache and his disciples on the geography of civilization). Romer himself is the author of an important, but hardly known in Poland study in the field of civilization geography, which combines theses drawn from the French classical geography, with the achievements of Polish science of civilization by Koneczny (Romer, 1920). According to the results of previous research French geography of civilization and Polish science of civilization developed at the same time independently of each other (Wilczyński, 2011: 120–125). Eugeniusz Romer turns out to be so far the only link between the two centers of development of the idea, which was marginalized during the next half-century, and in recent decades has a period of its great development⁶.

In order to formulate the “inherent natural fundamentals” of Polish national territory, which would be better than proposed by Nałkowski principle of transitionality, Romer formulated the alternative doctrine of the bridge, or the platform between two seas. He believed that Polish territories included the area of the Eurasian continent which narrows between the Black and Baltic Seas, forming a sort of bridge between these two bodies of water, and simultaneously a gateway from the West to the East.⁷ Romer claimed this to be the main feature of the area under examination, instead of transitionality proposed by Nałkowski. He also pointed out the extremely close physiographic relationship of Polish territories to the land of Europe, emphasizing Poland’s distinctive geographical position in relation with the East. In the frontier zone separating historic Polish lands from Russia Romer proposed a natural boundary line whose positioning was dependent on climatic, hydrographic, and morphological differentiations. This concept seemed to be basically consistent with the intuitive assumptions of the Polish society, for whom (even with no scientific evidence) the natural Polish territories extended from sea to sea, stretching from the Oder to the Dvina-Dnieper frontier zone (Romer, 1917, 1964).

⁵ Geographical chapter in the study entitled „*Poland and the general culture*” edited by Feliks Koneczny is written by Stanisław Pawłowski and Eugeniusz Romer (Koneczny, 1918).

⁶ It does not mean unfortunately that geography restored the importance of civilization as one of its key notions. The civilization concept has become the subject of debate mainly due to the engagement from the side of historians and politologists. The contribution of geographers to this interesting and important discussion remains quite imperceptible.

⁷ Geopolitical ideas of Romer are the subject-matter of the extensive study by Furmański (2011).

Since both Nałkowski and Romer emphasize the key role of society in shaping geographical reality, the controversy between these great researchers is limited to whether the expression “transitionality” is correct to designate the individual character of the area. So it is mainly the linguistic problem and, therefore, the Nałkowski – Romer dispute takes on the character of logomachy. It is true since there is no significant controversy between the Piast idea of Poland, the proponent in the light of the literature is Nałkowski, and the Jagiellonian idea, for which in the opinion of many authors opted Romer. This issue is resolved by Eugeniusz Romer, who argued that there was no difference between the two opposing visions of Poland: “For there are only two ideas of Poland possible: the Piast and the Jagiellonian one. Although the Piast Poland constitutes only the original creation, which, after all, entered the Jagiellonian tracks” (Romer, 2010: 186).

The concept of Romer was in the thirties of the last century effectively developed by Jerzy Smoleński (2012). Just as Nałkowski’s doctrine, it has its weak points, particularly in the circumstances of the contemporary political division. The crucial area for the bridge concept was Eastern Galicia, linked by rivers to the Black Sea and to the Baltic, that is nowadays almost entirely located within the boundaries of Ukraine. In spite of that the bridge concept may give rise to foreign policy and become a basis for interesting geopolitical programs. It should create the basis for a discourse concerning the international position and role of Poland.

References

- Furmański, P. (2011). *Indywidualność geograficzna Polski w koncepcjach Eugeniusza Romera (Geographic individuality of Poland in Eugeniusz Romer's concepts)*. Geopolityka.net, Polskie Towarzystwo Geopolityczne.
- Koneczny, F. (1918). *Polska w kulturze powszechnej (Poland and the general culture)*. Kraków: Krakowska Ekspozytura Biura Patronatu dla Spółek Oszczędnościowych i Pożyczek.
- Misinieć, S. (1998). *Dar nawrócenia. Doświadczenie łaski w procesie nawrócenia Eugeniusza Romera (The gift of conversion. The experience of grace in the process of conversion of Eugeniusz Romer)*. Kraków: Wyd. Św. Stanisława BM Archidiecezji Krakowskiej.
- Nałkowski, W. (1887). Polska. Obraz geograficzny Polski historycznej (Poland: geographical effigy of the historical Polish lands). In: B. Chlebowski and W. Walewski (ed.), *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich (Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and the other Slavonic Countries)*, vol. VIII. Warszawa: Władysław Walewski.
- Nałkowski, W. (1912). *Terytorjum Polski historycznej jako indywidualność geograficzna (Geographical individuality of the historic Polish territory)*. Warszawa: Towarzystwo Krajoznawcze.
- Romer, E. (1917). *Polska. Ziemia i państwo (Poland. The Land and the State)*. Lwów: Gebethner.
- Romer, E. (1920). *Études de civilisation comparée (Polonais, Ruthènes et Allemands)*. Paris: Henri Barrère.
- Romer, E. (1946). Czy Polska była do r. 1939 „krajem przejściową”? (Was Poland a „transitional country” before 1939?). *Przegląd Geograficzny*, XX, 1–7.
- Romer, E. (1964). Le Caractère et la Vie du Paysage Polonais. In: E. Romer, *Wybór prac (Selection of writings)*, vol. IV. Warszawa: PWN, 255–266.

- Romer, E. (1969). *O geografii. Rozważania historyczne i metodologiczne (Historical and Philosophical Discourses on the Subject of Geography)*. A. Zierhoffer (ed.), *Travaux de la Société des Sciences et des Lettres de Wrocław*, Seria B, No 153.
- Romer, E. (1988). *Pamiętniki. Problemy sumienia i wiary (Memoirs. Problems of conscience and faith)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.
- Romer, E. (2010). *Pamiętnik paryski 1918–1919, cz. I i II (Paris diary 1918–1919, part I and II)*, ed. S. Sierpowski. Wrocław: OW Foka.
- Smoleński, J. (2012). Questions concerning the political geography of Poland. In: W. Wilczyński (ed.). *A Source Book of the Polish Classical Geography*. Kraków: Dehon, 87–99.
- Wilczyński, W. (2011). *Ideowe źródła i tożsamość geografii (Conceptual Sources of Geography and Its Identity)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP.
- Wilczyński, W. (2011a). Introduction. In: Concept of Waclaw Nałkowski in the light of contemporary science and philosophy. *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis, Studia Geographica II*, 3–10.
- Wilczyński, W. (2012). *A Source Book of Polish Classical Geography*. Kraków: Dehon.

Witold Wilczyński, Assoc. Prof., Pedagogical University of Cracow Institute of Geography, Department of Entrepreneurship and Spatial Management.

Professor of Geography at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, as well as co-founder and head of the “Lelevel Society” Research Group. The member of the Polish Geographical Society. His main research interests are history and philosophy of geography, regional geography, political geography, and geopolitics. Follower of the classical concept of geography. He has published several monographs and handbooks including: *Concepts of Nature in the History of Geographical Thought*, 1994, 1996 (Polish, English); *Religion, Ideology, and Geographical Thought*, 1998 (co-edited by Ute Wardenga, English); *Autonomy and Unity of Geography: A Methodological Study*, 2003 (Polish); *Conceptual Sources and Identity of Geography*, 2011 (Polish); *Concepts of Waclaw Nałkowski in the Light of Contemporary Science and Philosophy*, 2011 (Polish); *A Source Book of the Polish Classical Geography*, 2012 (English).

Contact details:

e-mail: witoldwilczynski@yahoo.com

adres/address: Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny w Krakowie,
Instytut Geografii, Zakład Przedsiębiorczości i Gospodarki Przestrzennej,
ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Polska (Poland)