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Henry Cord Meyer

Drang nach Osten

*Fortunes of a Slogan-Concept
in German-Slavic Relations, 1849-1990*

Peter Lang

Reviewed by Douglas Selvage

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At times historians repeat a phrase or concept so often that it becomes accepted as historical fact. In his work, Henry Cord Meyer explores the evolution of the phrase *Drang nach Osten* as a "slogan-concept" in polemical and scholarly works. Contrary to popular historical wisdom, the phrase, he finds, did not originate in Germany, but in the Slavic world. Indeed, he seeks to establish why *Drang nach Osten*, which has "achieved full conceptual establishment in the Slavic world since 1945," has been so roundly rejected by German historians (p. 13). German scholars, he believes, should "reconsider the possibilities of the concept in an atmosphere of mutual respect" for their Slavic colleagues (p. 138).

According to Meyer, the phrase *Drang nach Osten* originated in 1849 with the Polish journalist Julian Klaczko. He invented it to "protest the expansionism advocated by important German national liberals at the Frankfurt Parliament." Although the phrase allegedly "fell on barren political ground" in Poland, it was revived in Russia in the 1860s by the Panslav editor of *Moskovskie Vedemosti*, Mikhail Katkov. Katkov, whom Meyer

dubs "the effective originator" of the slogan, popularized it in his polemics with Baltic Germans over Russification (p. 133). By the mid-1880s, *Drang nach Osten* entered into a number of scholarly works in Russia; it had evolved from a political "slogan" into a "concept" or *Begriff*.^[1]

From the Panslav milieu in Russia, the slogan spread to the other Slavic nationalities in central and eastern Europe. They reinterpreted the slogan to conform to their own local conflicts with the Germans. Although Polish authors Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski and Boleslaw Prus had popularized the idea of German pressure to the East as early as the 1860's, Meyer contends it was not until the Prague Neoslav Conference of 1908 that *Drang nach Osten* came into German use in the Polish lands. Its main propagator was nationalist politician Roman Dmowski, who sought to emphasize a common Polish-Russian front against the Germans. The slogan also spread from the Panslav milieu to the Czech lands--via Paris. Czech historians borrowed the phrase from the French Slavist Louis Leger, who first used it in the 1890s "to describe a process of cultural Germanization ... with-

in the Habsburg monarchy" (p. 94). The Young Czechs, led by Karel Kramar, used the slogan in their struggle with the Pan-Germans in Bohemia. As was the case in Poland, the Neoslav Congress marked a turning point for the slogan's popularization in the Czech lands.

Beyond the three national variations, the phrase gained more general usage as Europe drifted towards World War I. During the Bosnian Crisis of 1908-09, it appeared in "its full anti-Habsburg and anti-German version of a thrust south-eastward from Vienna" (p. 99). This particular variation on the slogan resonated not only in Serbia, but also in the popular press throughout Slavic Europe and in France. A fifth variation came into circulation around the same time; it attributed Austria-Hungary's Balkan thrust to Germany, which sought to expand its economic interests into the Near East (e.g., the Berlin-Baghdad railway). By 1910, thanks to such political scientists as Georges Weill, Andre Cheradame, and Rene Henry, the phrase had achieved "a kind of conceptual certitude for a politically sophisticated French readership" (p. 102). It also gained a certain respectability in Great Britain as the island-nation moved to counter the perceived German threat after 1904. Robert W. Seton-Watson, who later founded the *Slavonic Review* and the School of Slavonic Studies at the University of London, used the slogan in several works before World War I.

It was during the war, however, that all five variants of the slogan finally merged into one general, all-encompassing concept of German expansion to the east. This broadened concept gained popular acceptance in all the nations allied against Germany. The most notable propagators of the phrase during the hostilities were Seton-Watson and Czech leader Thomas Masaryk. Although the phrase fell into disuse after the Paris peace settlement, it revived after the Nazis came to power in 1933. Indeed, some Nazi propagandists referred favorably to the *Drang nach Osten*, as had a handful of Pan-Germans a generation

earlier. During World War II, the Nazis burned the concept of *Drang nach Osten* into the consciousness of their Slavic victims in Central and Eastern Europe. After the war, the concept became a mainstay in Soviet bloc historiography--and propaganda.

Although Meyer provides a useful introduction to *Drang nach Osten*'s evolution, he concedes that much research remains to be done. Given the slogan's broad circulation, only a sustained, collaborative, international effort will most likely yield a complete history of the slogan. A cursory examination of Wojciech Wrzesinski's *Sasiad--Czy wrog? [Neighbor--Or Enemy?]* suggests, for example, that the slogan had become a "concept" in Poland long before the Neoslav Congress of 1908. [2] As early as the 1860s and 1870s, Wilhelm Boguslawski had established the idea in Polish historiography that the German *parcie na wschod*--Polish for *Drang nach Osten*--was a constant feature throughout German history. In 1876, Jan Jelenski found the alleged origins of *parcie na wschod* in Germany's economic and demographic expansion; the higher level of civilization in Germany had led the Germans to expand at the weakest point, to the East. A closer examination of Polish, Czech, and Serbian sources--Meyer concedes--might lead to a different interpretation of the slogan's spread.

Is it possible, after all, that the phrase did originate in Germany? In his open letter from 1849, Klaczko acted as if he was citing the Germans themselves when he used the slogan "*Drang nach Osten*." Meyer does not discount the possibility that "the expression may have been adapted from some by now forgotten Balt writer under the influence of the national cultural revival between 1856 and 1865..." (p. 61) In his *Preussische Jahrbuecher* for August 1862, Treitschke used something akin to the slogan when he wrote, "Noch weiter gen Osten drang der deutsche Kolonist" (p. 61). Although the slogan might have originated in Germany, Meyer demonstrates quite

convincingly that its main area of circulation has been the Slavic world. Indeed, most German scholars have rejected the slogan as mere Panslav (or later, Soviet) agitation against Germany.

This brings us to a final point. Why should German historians embrace a vague "concept" that has had a much livelier history as a propaganda slogan—whether in the case of Katkov's agitation against the Baltic Germans, Masaryk's agitation for a Czechoslovak state, Nazi agitation for Lebensraum in Eastern Europe, or Soviet agitation to isolate West Germany after World War II? Even if the concept has found broad acceptance in Slavic historiography since World War II, this does not mean that it is factually accurate. The phrase is most often used to suggest a basic continuity in German history from the eleventh century to the present; it is closely linked to Slavic stereotypes of the German national character. In the early 1900s, Polish historian Szymon Askenazy rejected the phrase with regard to the Middle Ages. German expansion in that era, he asserted, was directed more to the south than to the north or the east.[3] The German historian Matthias Wippermann, with whom Meyer takes issue, argues that "the medieval *Ostsiedlung* had no such aggressive character as attributed to it by the slogan; the medieval movement eastward of the Germans has to be dissociated from the anti-Polish policies of the Second Empire and, above all, from the genocidal practices of National Socialism in Eastern Europe." [4] Lumping German behavior in all three epochs together under the value-laden phrase *Drang nach Osten* seems at best an oversimplification.

In conclusion, Meyer's work presents a useful introduction to *Drang nach Osten* as a "slogan-concept." The slogan, he demonstrates, was more widely used in the Slavic world than in Germany and most likely originated there. He also presents a number of important hypotheses about the slogan's spread and evolution that deserve to be tested in future research.

Notes

[1]. Meyer places his study in the field of *Begriffsgeschichte*, which is "preoccupied with language in a methodological context and as a subject of research (p. 13)." See James J. Sheehan, "Begriffsgeschichte: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978), 312-19.

[2]. Wojciech Wrzesinski, *Sasiad. Czy wrog? Ze studiow nad ksztaltowaniem obrazu Niemca w Polsce w latach 1795-1939* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego, 1992), 91, 135, 176.

[3]. Ibid., 190-91.

[4]. Wolfgang Wippermann, *Der 'deutsche Drang nach Osten'. Ideologie und Wirklichkeit eines politischen Schlagwortes* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 133, as cited in Meyer, 18-19.

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