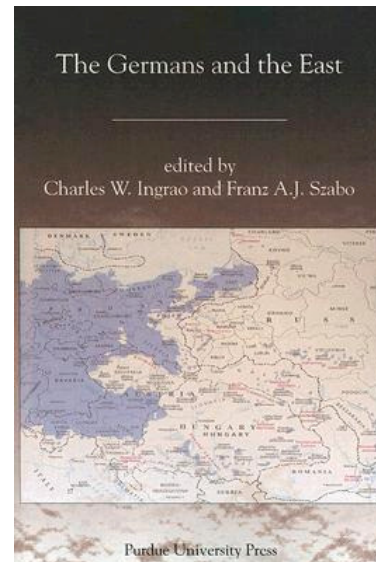


Eva Hahn / Hans Henning Hahn: The “Germans and the East”
Back to Normality – But What Is Normal?

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Within the framework of the “Back-to-Normality” model, the “normality” of the German-Eastern neighborhood is said to have been much more peaceful and cooperative before the late-nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is widely believed that all we need in order to restore a harmonious relationship between the Germans and their eastern neighbors is to overcome the mental, political and cultural distortions of the last one hundred years or so. The protagonists of this idea tend to construe images of Central Europe along the lines of what Anthony D. Smith calls the “modernist orthodoxy” of nationalist theories, echoing the tradition of contempt for the “history-less peoples” between Germany and Russia, with their “small-scale, fissiparous, ethnolinguistic nationalisms”.

The critics of the “Back-to-Normality” model tend to question this concept. They consider the history of the “German relationship with its eastern neighbors” as incomparable with the history of relationships among other East European nations themselves, and with the history of the German relationship with its western neighbors. The “German relationship with its eastern neighbors” is looked upon as special, because its “normality” is supposed to have been governed by a long-term German preponderance over and arrogance towards their eastern neighbors. The critics surely tend to admit that national chauvinism, stereotypes and prejudices are a burden for the relationships among all other nations in general, but that none of that has caused as great a problem as the German versions of it. National chauvinism is bad, these critics usually say, but German national chauvinism toward their Eastern neighbors is worse than any other form of chauvinism in Europe (with the possible exception of anti-Semitism and Russian arrogance towards other nations). The “normality” of the “German relationship with its eastern neighbors” is, then, viewed as determined by its “abnormality”.

Disputes about the past cannot be separated from politics, nor do historians construct their visions of the past in a political vacuum. Politics is very much about contested spaces of memory, and the best historians can do is not to follow the emotional calls made by politicians demanding their help in resolving conflicts between states in overcoming the past, but rather to continue with their job of critically re-examining all existing visions of the past and correcting the obvious errors.