

# The role of the German Geopolitik in charting the course of Nazi military strategy during the Second World War

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**FINAL TERM ESSAY**

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## Introduction and Background Information

The German *Geopolitik* ideology, forged on the core principles of expansionism (Herb, 1989) and national self-sufficiency was a loosely established pseudo-scientific geopolitical concept (Herwig, 1999) with some profound influence on Nazi propaganda and military strategy. Its structure was so complex and amorphous (Herb, 1989) that even its chief doyen and architect, Karl Haushofer struggled to posit a satisfactory definition for the ideology. He merely defined it as “the doctrine of the earth relations of political developments...based on the broad foundations of geography, particularly political geography, as the doctrine of political space organisms and their structure” (Herwig, 1999). Charles Hagan (1942) draws the distinction between political geography and (German) geopolitics and he posits that “Geopolitics on the other hand observes and speculates upon the influence of geographical necessities upon political events and changes in the political form of states”. In simple terms, geopolitics is the ideology of integrating political events into their geographical settings (Hagan, 1942).

Despite being popularly acclaimed as the intellectual brainchild of Haushofer (Heske, 1987), the rudiments and central theories behind *Geopolitik* were barely original to Haushofer (Herwig, 1999). Even the term *Geopolitik*, often associated with German geography was first introduced by Swedish political scientist, Rudolf Kjellen (Bassin, 1987). The fundamental notions of space, national self-sufficiency, heartland and pan-regions were all adopted from other geographers (Herwig, 1999). Haushofer modified the ideology of expansionism via migratory-colonization, originally developed as *Lebensraum* by German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel (Barnes and Minca, 2013). Ratzel originally formulated *Lebensraum* as a biogeographical concept to explain the colonization of new lands by plant and animal species. German geopoliticians later on

expanded Ratzel's concept to include human societies which aspired to attain more space and resources (Glick, 1988). Haushofer also borrowed the concept of autarky (national self-sufficiency) from Kjellen. Kjellen posited that a state was a "biological revelation, a living being" and that all states will maintain their status if they remained independent and powerful. Haushofer incorporated a social Darwinist twist to Kjellen's autarky concept and proposed that state rule should merely be based on natural selection without social hierarchy or racial exclusivity (Herwig, 1999).

The concept of "heartland", first introduced by British geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder was also an essential component of *Geopolitik*. Mackinder stated in his *The Geographical Pivot of History* work in 1904 that the heartland (vast Eurasian landmass dominated by Russia) was the epicenter of world politics and the vital pivot area to attaining international stability. He suggested that unilateral control or a strategic heartland alliance (typified by a Russo-German union) was central to world domination (Osterud, 1988). Finally, the concept of German panregionalism was incorporated from the *Alldeustch* Pan-German movement (Herwig, 1999). The idea of *Mittleuropa*, a geopolitical project based on German expansion through central European countries such as Poland, Switzerland and Austria-Hungary was essential for German strategic command over Central Europe; a buffer region over which absolute control prevented domination by other Eastern or Western European powers (Chianterra-Stutte, 2008). *Mittelafrika* was also a grandiose project for German colonial control over South-Western Africa, a strategic portion of the African continent with extensive mineral resources and under threat of annexation by the British Empire (Sandner, 1989).

Ever since the dawn of the Second World War, there have been fierce debates among historical geographers and academics on the connections between Haushofer and *Geopolitik* as a

whole and the regime of the Third Reich (Herwig, 1999). Whilst geographers such as Mark Bassin are skeptical of the connections between *Geopolitik* and Nazi ideology (Bassin, 1987), others such as Henning Heske believe the connections are profound and are the intellectual basis behind Nazi propaganda and strategy. Although Heske concedes the serious misconceptions of Haushofer's ideas in post-war Anglo-American literature, he affirms that the Nazi Reich could have only been founded on the intellectual support provided by Karl Haushofer. He argues that Haushofer's extensive writings, lectures and travels put him in touch with a very large audience, of which the Nazi Reich was a part of (Heske, 1987).

Holger Herwig also cites evidence from archived notes that Haushofer regularly visited Adolf Hitler and Rudolf Hess when they were in prison for their role in the failed Beer Hall Putsch. Herwig states that during these prison visits, Haushofer imbued in the pair the concepts of *Lebensraum*, heartland and especially Ratzel's geographical piece, *Politische Geographie*. It has also been established that Hess was a former student and staunch follower of Haushofer. Hess and Haushofer had such a great relationship that Haushofer served as Hess's best man along with Hitler during his wedding and Haushofer also provided Hess with refuge after the Beer Hall Putsch (Herwig, 1999). It is apparent from the cited evidence that Haushofer shared connections for some time with the two most powerful men of the Nazi Reich.

Although Haushofer did not play an active role in Nazi politics, he regularly met Hess for detailed political discussions until Hess's arrest in Scotland in 1941. It appears Haushofer's political influence totally waned thereafter (Heske, 1987). The loss of Hess's notes on the Landsberg prison lectures among other letters exchanged with Haushofer (Herwig, 1999) merely subjects some of the analysis on the extent of Haushofer's influence on other Nazi leaders to mere speculation. However, the contributions of the *Geopolitik* ideology to Nazi

military strategy and foreign policy in general are hardly disputable. Though maintaining skepticism of any profound connections between geopolitics and Nazi ideology, Bassin concedes that the *Lebensraum* concept, which Haushofer tirelessly preached ultimately affected Nazi policy formulations and applications (Bassin, 1987). This essay examines the contributions of the core *Geopolitik* principles of *Lebensraum*, heartland and pan-regionalism to Nazi military strategy during the Second World War. The autarky concept will not be explicitly examined because it is complementary to the geographical constructs of *Lebensraum* and heartland; that is, without the two, no European nation could achieve self-sufficiency (Herwig, 1999)

### **Acquiring *Lebensraum***

Prior to formulating *Lebensraum* in the 1890s, Ratzel extensively studied biological species (plant and animals) in their natural habitat. He was particularly fascinated by the sheer diversity of life and he reasoned that only complex and probabilistic concepts could account for this diversity as well as explain the mechanisms underlying biological change and expansion. He therefore developed the concept of *Lebensraum* from his studies of species and he defined it as the “geographical surface area required to support a living species at its current population size and mode of existence”. He explained that the defining boundaries of living species depended on their ability to absorb nutrients from the environment and expand upon exceeding their metabolic quota (Smith, 1980). J.H. Paterson reports that German geopoliticians later tendered a Social Darwinist twist to *Lebensraum* in that “the claim that the amount of space to which a state is entitled is governed not simply by the size or density of its population but by its capacity to use space and resources” (Paterson, 1987). Haushofer particularly championed this designation of

*Lebensraum* (Heske, 1987) and this is readily apparent in his definition of *Lebensraum* as “the right and duty of a nation to provide ample space and resources for its people” (Herwig, 1999). Despite Haushofer’s incessant campaigns for an expansion of Germany’s *Lebensraum*, he had no idea about the spatial direction or extent of the expansion. Eugene Palka notes that Haushofer’s 1941 classic on military geopolitics arguably inspired Hitler to trigger the notion of *Lebensraum* to justify Nazi conquests during the Second World War (Palka, 1995). It is then apparent that the conferment of right and responsibility to attaining *Lebensraum* legitimized the expansionist drives executed by the Nazi military during the advent of the Second World War (Heske, 1987).

Tobias Jersak particularly reports that Hitler summoned the *Großdeutschen Reichstag*, the parliament of Greater Germany in 1938 to present his plans of expelling all Jews in Germany and attaining *Lebensraum* in the eastern side of the country. Jersak states that Hitler linked his military plans for annexation of Czechoslovakia with the “Jewish Question” in a move which appears to communicate that the attainment of *Lebensraum* for the Aryan races of Germany should begin with expelling “...a certain percentage of the population lives as a parasite and feeds on the flesh and productive work of other nations”. Hitler was well aware that he would require a multi-national European agreement between nations that normally wouldn’t convene together and this could potentially be a fatal blow to resolving the “German Question”—the attainment of *Lebensraum* for the German people and expelling all Jews from the Reich. In the face of any hindrances, Hitler was prepared to unilaterally realize his objectives and if this meant “plunging the peoples into a world war”, this would in no doubt compel the physical “destruction of the Jewish race in Europe” (Jersak, 2000).

Wolf Tietze also reports that the quest for attaining *Lebensraum* motivated the geographical training of the Nazi military *Wehrmacht* comprising of the army (*Heer*), navy (*Kriegsmarine*) and air force (*Luftwaffe*) during the Second World War. This training was essential to knowing the *Lebensraum* of other neighbouring European countries much to the disadvantage of the inhabitants of those countries. Tietze notes this knowledge of the geographical terrain of neighbouring countries conferred military supremacy and was a potent weapon in maintaining Nazi Germany's own *Lebensraum* as well as attaining the *Lebensraum* of others (Tietze, 1993). The *Luftwaffe* was particularly crucial in aiding Hitler secure *Lebensraum* in Poland. For example, the Białowieża forest in Eastern Poland was brought under German control after a vicious combat with the Polish soldiers and Soviet Red Army inhabitants of the forest. Phillip Blood reports that the Nazi military machine was highly dependent on forestry products and derivatives and hence the annexation of the forest. The *Luftwaffe* mass slaughtered the Jews, Poles and Soviets occupying the forest region by New Year's Eve 1941. The region was heavily fortified by German troops stationed there and by July 1942, a special battalion of troops arrived with special instructions to fully consummate the region's status as part of German *Lebensraum* (Blood, 2010).

The concept of migration-colonization, bordered about the ideology of *Lebensraum* was well planned and executed that a substantial portion of Europe, largely to the east fell under German control within a short span of World War II. Neil Smith notes that the sentiments of war brought about by the adoption of the *Lebensraum* ideology compelled the Third Reich to establish a number of think-tanks aimed at realizing the practical advancement of Nazi geopolitical interests (Smith, 1990). The existence of the "*Institut für Geopolitik*" maintained by Haushofer to dictate Nazi geopolitical and military strategy during the Second World War has been largely debated

by historians and geographers (Herwig, 1999; Murphy, 2014; Heske 1987; Herb, 1989). Another important geopolitical institution was the “Commissariat for the Enhancement of German Folk-nationalism”. The Commissariat, commissioned under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, the *Reichsführer* of the notorious *Schutzstaffel* (SS) sought to create a centralized command of regional planning and research for *Lebensraum* acquired from newly conquered eastern territories. The establishment of geopolitical think-tanks during the Third Reich fostered geographical scholarship which contributed to the planning and annexation of foreign lands as German *Lebensraum*. Geographical and geopolitical journals increased in volume and circulation relative to other disciplines after 1933 (Smith, 1990). The *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Geopolitik* (Geopolitics Study Group) was also essential in utilizing geopolitical research as a weapon to advance the Reich’s quest for *Lebensraum*. The group particularly sought to disseminate more copies of Haushofer’s *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, presumably to enhance public sensitization schemes on Nazi Germany’s quest for *Lebensraum* (Heske, 1987).

### **Gaining Control of the Heartland**

Halford Mackinder formulated the concept of heartland in response to the rapid declining centuries-long era of geographical exploration. He reasoned there will hardly be any new territories to be discovered and that political events in various parts of the world will more likely have a stronger bearing on world affairs unlike before. He envisaged the absence of novel exploratory frontiers would compel the great European powers (France, England, Germany and Russia) towards aggression in an era Mackinder termed as “the post-Columbian age”. According to Mackinder, the strategic step to gaining world domination will be to gain influence from the

“pivot area” or “heartland”, either by alliance or by absolute control. This is perfectly encapsulated in Mackinder’s famous theory: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the world” (Sidaway, 2001; Osterud, 1988).

Haushofer found great utility in Mackinder’s theories and thus distilled them into his notions of German geopolitics. He primarily argued that the Eurasian-Africa landmass—the epicentre of wealth and human existence was the crowning trophy for Germany’s quest for dominance and autarky. Control of the heartland, with the alliance of a strong sea power would provide impetus for control of the continental islands (lesser Americas, Black Africa, and Australia-New Zealand)—under domination by the two great sea powers; Imperial Britain and Japan—leading to complete world domination. Haushofer therefore theorized that a German-Russian alliance (the pivotal heartland) in conjunction with Imperial Japan will be the perfect combination for world domination (Herwig, 1999). It is not quite apparent how Haushofer’s geopolitical notions on the heartland crept into Nazi ideology and though the connections are hardly debatable, inferences from letters, notes and archives either point to Haushofer’s direct associations with Hitler and Hess at Landsberg and the hotly debated “*Institut für Geopolitik*” or likely Haushofer’s indirect influence of the Reich via Hess. It is also logical to consider the extensive coverage of Haushofer’s periodical on geopolitics *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* and the implications it may have had on influencing the military strategy of the Reich (Herwig, 1999; O’Loughlin and Van der Wusten; Heske, 1987; Herb, 1989; Murphy, 2014).

The quest to gain control of the heartland began in 1939 with a Nazi Germany-Soviet Union Non-Aggression Alliance on mutual co-operation on military affairs and external aggression (Lerski, 1963). Unbeknownst to the Soviets, Hitler had already secretly commissioned weapons

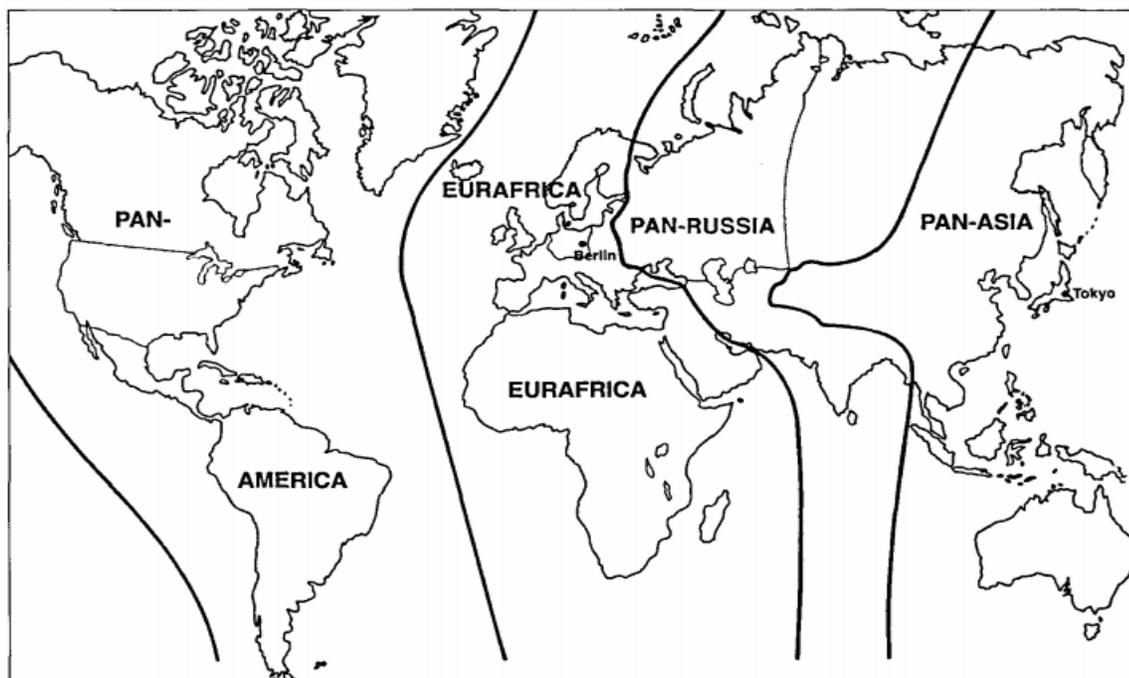
testing in the Soviet Union (Herwig, 1999) and it appears the Non-Aggression Pact was only a stepping stone to gaining full control over the heartland. When the pact was signed, Haushofer was very jubilant that his Mackinderian conception on connecting with the heartland was finally nearing fruition and he rallied the German people to behind *der Fuhrer* (Herwig, 1999; Neumann, 1943). The signing of the pact came after ongoing, extensive research into the development and production of sophisticated military weapons. The development of the far advanced *Messerschmitt Me 262* turbojets meant the heartland could be easily penetrated and subjugated under German control. Such was the performance of these turbojets that the Commander of Luftwaffe fighters reported feeling "...as if an angel was pushing" after his very first flight (Neumann, 1943; Schollars, 2010). In hindsight, it appears Hitler was not interested in upholding the terms of the pact and the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941 under the secret military code, "Operation Barbarossa". The quest to gaining control of the heartland and ultimately world control—as Mackinder and later on Haushofer preached—was now in full swing (Lerski, 1963). According to his published comments on the invasion, Haushofer heralded the invasion as constituting "the greatest task of geopolitics" and viewed it as "the rejuvenation of space in the Old World" (Herwig, 1999).

### **Creating German Pan-regions (*Mitteleuropa* and *Mittelafrika*)**

According to O'Loughlin and Van der Wusten, a pan-region is a "large functional area linking core states to resource peripheries and cutting across latitudinally distributed environmental zones". The concept of the German pan region received inspiration from the *Panideen* (pan idea) ideology that pan regions were essential towards German autarky and the

world's geopolitical system should be organized into units, each inspired by an ideological basis. These pan regions will merely be a geographical expression of pan ideas (O'Loughlin and Van der Wusten, 1990) and to Haushofer, "no nation is a region unto itself" and the need for Germany to extend its influence through space was expedient if the quest for world domination and autarky was to be realized. Haushofer generated a map (see below) based on this vision with Eurafrika—containing the revived *Mitteleuropa* and *Mittelafrika* under central command from Berlin (Herwig, 1999). These territories—providing unfettered access to raw materials, products and human labour—were necessary for German's quest for autarky in an era of growing global industrialization. The Eurafrika pan-region was simply Germany's best prospect in maintaining a thriving industrial economy to boost its military supremacy and stifle competition from global powers such as the Soviet Union and the United States of America (O'Loughlin and Van der Wusten, 1990).

HAUSHOFER'S PANREGIONS



Source: Karl Haushofer, *Geopolitik der Pan-Ideen* (Berlin: Zentral 1931).

With extensive plans predating World War I, *Mittelafrika* was a grandiose scheme to civilize the natives of Africa and bring the continental economy under German control in a quest to subjugate the world to “German militarism” and for this to happen, “the African native must play his part in the new slavery”. This territorial expansion scheme, veiled under the guise of colonialism sought to plunder the continent’s mineral resources for Germany’s benefit and also use the continent as recruiting grounds during war campaigns particularly during World War I. The Indian and Atlantic oceans bordering the continent were perfect sites for the construction of naval and submarine bases that will dominate major ocean routes and quell the naval military might of Imperial Britain and the United States. A map depicting the German conception of *Mittelafrika* prior to World War I is indicated below (Smuts, 1918).



**THE GERMAN CONCEPTION OF "MITTELAFRIKA" AND THE POLITICAL DIVISION OF THE CONTINENT BEFORE THE WAR**

The shaded ribbon shows the outline of "Mittelafrika" from the block overleaf; it includes all the African possessions of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal supplying tropical products.

*Mittleuropa* on the other hand emerged as a German intellectual conception to solve the problems of Middle Europe. The concept was so vaguely defined and extensively debated that very few geographers found any utility in developing the concept prior to 1914 (Meyer, 1946). Since its earliest formulation, *Mittleuropa* has been conceived as a topographical term, a physical region based on a single physical criterion or a set of them, a concept of historical and/or political bias and a geographical region restricted by physical and cultural elements. Redundant for the most part after World War I, *Mittleuropa* was revived in Nazi Germany as a geopolitical concept in the sense of a middle or central European region incorporated into Eurafrika ruled from Berlin (Sinhubber, 1955).

Haushofer's strategic situation of pan-regions within the core of Europe and most of Africa (Eurafrika) was essential for Germany assumption of economic, political and cultural hegemony over the world. More so, this "reterritorialization" was essential towards keeping the United States and the Soviet Union neutral during the Second World War whilst Nazi Germany focused on defeating France and the United Kingdom. The defeat of these two major powers would mean Nazi Germany could acquire the vast territories and wealth of these imperial nations and incorporate them into Eurafrika. This strategy was essential towards tilting the European balance of power—previously centred within Britain and France—in favour of Nazi Germany (O'Loughlin and Van der Wusten, 1990; Herwig, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the established information in various journal articles and historical archives, the role of Karl Haushofer in actively spearheading the geopolitical and military strategies of the Third

Reich has been consistently subject to scrutiny (Heske; 1987; Herwig, 1999; Bassin, 1987). Geographer Mark Bassin believes the Nazis were always suspicious of adopting the principles of *Geopolitik* though he concedes the practice of *Lebensraum* meant geopoliticians didn't just share contacts but also had positive influences on the leadership of the Reich. He also concedes that Haushofer in particular was unequivocally close to the Nazi leadership. Despite these concessions, Bassin believes the view of Haushofer as "the man 'who gave Hitler his ideas'" is unsustainable. He maintains the suspicions held against Haushofer and geopoliticians by the Reich meant ideas could not easily flow from geopoliticians to the Nazi leadership (Bassin, 1987). Henrik Herb also argues that despite the common causes shared by both *Geopolitik* and Nazi persuasive maps, these similarities were not a product of concerted co-operation efforts between geopoliticians and Nazi officials and that both maps generated were actually different in political content and graphic form (Herb, 1989).

On the other hand, Henning Heske believes Haushofer's theories were the intellectual driving force behind Nazi Germany's triggering of the Second World War. He believes Haushofer should be held accountable for his efforts though he concedes post-war Anglo-American literature largely misconstrued the specifics of Haushofer's contributions towards the war effort. Heske also believes Haushofer's role in the war leaves him as a "black sheep among German geographers" (Heske, 1987). Holger Herwig also reports on the post-war interrogation of Haushofer and his vehement denials of contributing to the war effort despite some information contradicting his claims (Herwig, 1999). The difficulty in producing conclusive evidence implicating him of his active contributions at the time facilitated his release (Heske, 1987).

Regardless of the opposing views from geographers on the subject, the underlying theme is that the German *Geopolitik* did have an influence on charting the course of Nazi propaganda,

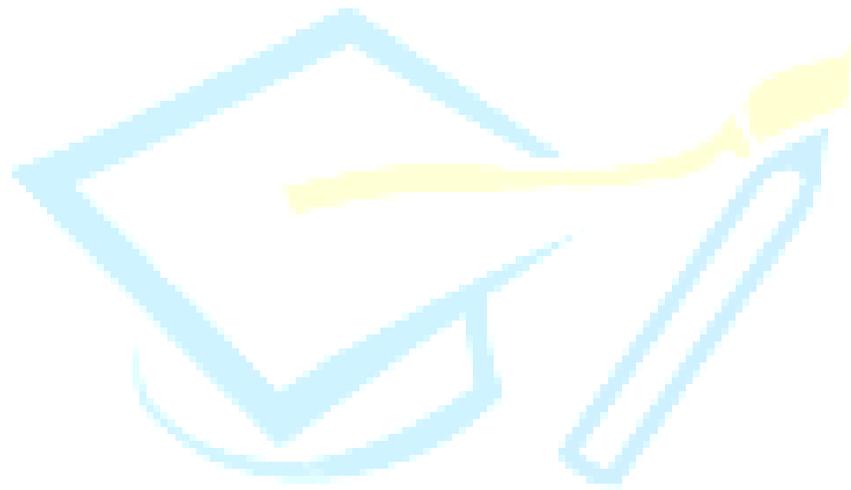
foreign policy and military strategy during the Second World War. It appears much of the debate is centred on the manner of influence and whether it is via Haushofer's direct associations with Hitler and the Reich leadership, Haushofer's indirect influence of Reich policy through Rudolf Hess, Haushofer's prison lectures on geopolitics with Hitler and Hess or via Haushofer's writings in his *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, the certainty is that the German *Geopolitik* played a role in charting the course of Nazi strategy during the Second World War. It can well be argued that the Reich would not approach the Second World War the way they did without the influence of geopolitics. The adoption of *Lebensraum* justified the annexation of neighbouring territories to expand Nazi Germany's space and resource potential so autarky could be realized. The concept of the heartland meant the Reich had to gain influence of the epicenter of human existence and resources to realize world domination whether this was by strategic alliance or annexation. In hindsight, it appears Hitler first opted for alliance then annexation to gain ultimate control of the heartland and attain world domination. Finally, the creation of strategic German pan-regions situated in Eurafrika was a revival of erstwhile German conceptions of attaining world domination via the creation of *Mitteleuropa* and *Mittelafrika*. This revival was essential towards maintaining economic, political and military hegemony over central Europe and Africa leading the Reich a step closer to beginning their "thousand-year" global reign (Heske; 1987; Herwig, 1999; Bassin, 1987; Lerski, 1963; Paterson, 1987; Murphy, 2014)

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