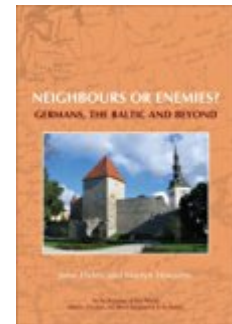


John Hiden, Martyn Housden. *Neighbours or Enemies?: Germans, the Baltic and Beyond*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. viii + 154 pp. \$48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-2349-9.

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## Trying to Redefine “Living Space”

With *Neighbours or Enemies*, John Hiden and Martyn Housden have published an interesting study on the forms of coexistence practiced by German minorities with majority populations that inhabit the “living space” between Germany and Russia—that is, East-Central Europe and the Baltics.[1] The authors argue for a new interpretation of the concept of “living space,” pointing to a need to save the term from its narrow equation with Nazi policies of genocide. Hiden and Housden thus refer to liberal alternatives to the nationality policies of the Nazis, which were viable in the political contexts of the 1920s.

Usefully, the book brings out the perspectives of Baltic German publicists and activists, most notably of Paul Schiemann, who envisioned a peaceful system of coexistence between nationalities in the ethnically mixed region. Schiemann based his thinking on the concept of national cultural autonomy, which originated from Austrian social democrats Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, and which had been successfully implemented by the legislatures of the interwar republics of Estonia and Latvia. These laws empowered ethnic communities within states as extra-territorial public corporations, thus possessing certain rights in the cultural sphere. For Schiemann, this system successfully solved the conflict of allegiance between state and nation: an individual could be a devoted member of a national community (in quite the same way as one could be a devoted member of a congregation), while remaining loyal to the state. Schiemann fought for his beliefs in minority organizations, such as the Ver-

band der Deutschen Minderheiten (Association of German Minorities, since 1928 Verband der Deutschen Volksgruppen, Association of German *Volk*-groups) and the European Nationalities Congress, which he himself had helped set up in the 1920s. He was eventually defeated by extreme nationalists, who maintained that loyalty to an organic German nation must always come before allegiance to an ethnically alien state. Schiemann’s struggle and his defeat is a telling commentary about the rise of Nazism and the conflagrations that this issue brought about.

The analysis of minority experiences, perceptions, and politics in the interwar years is the book’s most important contribution. However, Hiden and Housden try to stretch the narrative through the war years up to the present—a task too big for their conceptual framework. The first four chapters of the book deal with German national identity, particularly regarding the consciousness and experience of Germans who saw their social status change from a dominant group to a minority ethnos. From chapter 5 onwards, the narrative moves to new terrains: chapters 5 and 6 deal with the Nazi genocide during the war, chapter 7 with the period of the Federal Republic, and chapter 8 tries to wind up the subject by discussing contemporary memory politics in Germany and the Baltic states. While covering a lot of interesting ground, the authors fail to tie all the diverse topics together. If the concept of “living space” is meant to give a focus to the book, it is clearly not up to the task. Hiden and Housden do not defined the term, and use it in

such a loose way as to render it nearly meaningless. How can we talk of a “living space” after 1945, when the German presence in East-Central Europe had been almost entirely destroyed? While criticizing other historians for a too-narrow interpretation of *Lebensraum*, the authors open themselves to criticism for stretching the term too broadly.

Further problems arise in chapter 6, where Hiden and Housden introduce new themes that are not part of their stated objectives. The authors initially propose only two theses: that the book will challenge previous research on the Third Reich regarding the traditional narrow interpretation of “living space,” and that recent books on the topic have become “increasingly lengthy,” which makes their project of historicizing “living space” more difficult (a tautological statement at best). With this chapter, they turn to historiographical debates on the Third Reich, a shift in focus that obscures the authors’ claims of bringing new insights to the origins and the causes of the escalation of Nazi terror.

If the authors had succeeded in using a historiographical chapter to strengthen their argument, the change of course would not hinder the book’s argument. Unfortunately, one only finds an extended historiographical essay on history-writing in West Germany, revolving around the question of why German historians were not able to treat Nazi history properly. When it comes to history itself, there is little here that would significantly add to current knowledge about the Third Reich. In trying to explain why Germans became willing executioners, Hiden and Housden argue that the war on the eastern front was “no impersonal, clear-cut, high-tech Blitzkrieg” (p. 98). In order to illustrate this point, they reproduce a long description of road conditions in the East, intended to demonstrate the harsh working conditions of these ordinary perpetrators of mass murder. But eventually we are told that those conditions were not important at all, since the average soldiers involved never served at the front before embarking on their murderous mission. Why, then, spend so much time on these conditions? What is, in the end, the authors’ new insight on the debate about Hitler’s willing executioners? The main thesis appears to be that ideology was important. On page 101, for example, they write: “[S]o it came about that even the criminal world was permeated by ideology.” This statement is hardly an original thesis; nor should it come as a surprise that even criminals were affected by ideology. However, it would certainly have been worthwhile to make the point, had the authors offered an interesting analysis, about how, exactly, ordinary men be-

came indoctrinated. For example, it would have been interesting to know more about the Nazification of the Baltic-German community in the 1930s.

Chapter 7’s discussion of a “refugee nation” tries, unsuccessfully, to extend the narrative from 1945 to the 1990s. It is not clear why the authors repeat standard narratives about the new *Ostpolitik* of West German chancellor Willy Brandt at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s (pp. 115-121). They use Brandt as an anchor for the whole analysis. Hiden and Housden contrast Brandt’s new thinking about East-West relations with the perspectives and policies of the Konrad Adenauer government, as well as the organizations representing the expellees from East-Central Europe (Bund der Vertriebenen in particular). The policies of Adenauer, we are told, “clearly barred Germany from resuming its historic role in Mitteleuropa, impeding economic development and generating extensive social dislocation throughout the region” (p. 114). Brandt’s later efforts, on the other hand, laid the foundation for a “peaceful pan-European security order.” Because the new *Ostpolitik* is taken out of its context—the Cold War *detente* in super-power relations—the effect is that Brandt appears to have single-handedly transformed East-West relations. The reader is left to wonder why Adenauer and a whole generation of politicians had missed the chance to engage with a Stalinist Eastern bloc in a more positive way. But it is wrong to read the history of the 1940s to the 1960s backwards from the perspective of the 1970s. How would the authors imagine a West German government resuming its role as a bridge between East and West in the early 1950s, for example? Are they implying that Bonn should have opted for a neutral Germany, as Stalin was offering, with the likely prospect of becoming the next people’s democracy within the Soviet bloc?

The more promising part of the chapter is the discussion of the refugee organizations, such as the politically engaged Bund der Vertriebenen and the academic society Baltische Historische Kommission. A more thorough analysis of these communities would have given the chapter a better focus and tied the narrative to the first part of the book. It would have been interesting to know, for example, whether there was any debate in these communities on Brandt’s new *Ostpolitik*, which the expellees condemned. Was there a new Paul Schiemann arguing for a policy of reconciliation? In place of a balanced assessment of refugee perspectives, ideologies, and politics, we find an unnuanced image of refugees not being able to deal with their past honestly, and fighting against progressive policies like Brandt’s.

The last chapter, “End of Nationalism?” is written in similar vein. Here, history of memory occasionally lapses into paternalistic observations about the lack of proper historical consciousness among certain communities and peoples. We are told, for example, that historians in the Baltic states, particularly Estonia, “must head the mounting calls inside and outside their countries for a proper historical explanation of the recent [Nazi] past” because this is the only way towards an “enduring and solid sense of national identity” (p. 132). One has become accustomed to social scientists telling us what is proper national identity and what is the right way to remember the past, an acceptable stance when these normative claims are backed up by solid theory (which we do not find here). It does little good to reproduce clichés about certain nations doing too little or even being reluctant to admit their part in Nazi crimes. This description is not true in the Baltic case, as one can observe that the small number of historians of these countries have directed significant shares of their resources to investigating the Nazi past. It should also be noted that they have been busy counting the victims of two, not one, criminal regimes. For example, Hiden and Housden could have referred to the work of the Estonian commission on crimes against humanity, the reports of which were published

in 2006.[2] At present we find the volume in the selected bibliography, but it would have been more useful to have it in the main body of the text.

In sum, John Hiden and Martyn Housden have written an important book that addresses many areas that have been neglected in standard scholarship on the Third Reich. Particularly interesting are the chapters on minority politics and ideology in the interwar years. Unfortunately, the book is a patchwork of separate studies and lacks cohesion. It would have improved the book significantly had the authors considered more carefully what their intended contribution to scholarship was. As it now stands, the book has an unfinished quality to it—one that should, at least, lead the way for more scholarship on its more salient points.

#### Notes

[1]. This review has been written in the framework of the Estonian Science Foundation project SF0180050s09.

[2]. T. Hiio, M. Maripuu, and I. Paavle, eds., *Estonia 1940-1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity* (Tallinn: Estonian Foundation for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, 2006).

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