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OBITUARY OF JOHN HIDEN

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John Hiden, Historian of Germany and the Baltic States

In an age when many claim to be scholars of international global repute, John Hiden was the genuine article. Author or editor of at least 14 academic books, not to mention innumerable articles, he left a major impression on the historical study of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Germany and—perhaps more significant still—the Baltic States. He also contributed to the formulation of British foreign policy as the Baltic States made their transition to independence and contributed to the discussion of minority rights in post-Cold War Europe.

The eldest of three siblings, John Hiden was born on 21 February 1940 in London. He attended Acton County School (1951–58) where he later recalled its intellectual atmosphere energised by discussions of Stalinism. Upon leaving school he worked briefly in the office of a Jewish lawyer—where there was much talk about Germany’s past—and, later in life, also taught at a primary school and Repton. But it was in the field of academic History that John found his vocation.

With a first academic appointment at Aberdeen University (1973-79) John burst onto the academic scene producing path-breaking studies of Germany. *The Weimar Republic* (1974) was part of the well-established Longman Seminar Series and gave a thematic account of Germany’s most misunderstood period. Arguably it has never been bettered. Also arranged thematically—John hated dry, narrative History—was *Germany and Europe* (1977), a ‘little book’ about German foreign policy that was reviewed favourably by AJP Taylor. Decades ahead of Alan Bullock’s comparison of the two dictators, John collaborated with Paul Dukes to write a pioneering article comparing Stalin’s Russia with Hitler’s Germany (*New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 1978). In 1979 John was appointed Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Bradford, and moved while translating Martin Broszat’s seminal text *Der Staat Hitlers*. The work was well reviewed by linguists, a fact which paid testimony to his prodigious language skills. At Bradford he ran a tremendously successful conference on behalf of the German Historical Society which attracted luminaries such as Hans Mommsen. He went on to collaborate with John Farquharson to produce *Explaining Hitler’s Germany* (1983), a discussion of the historiography of the Third Reich which sold extremely well to schools readership. Throughout his career John never lost interest in Germany, also writing *Republican and Fascist Germany* (1996)—an analysis of Weimar and the Third Reich—and

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(with Martyn Housden) a study of that country's relations with the states to its east, *Neighbours or Enemies?* (2008).

John was one of the earliest authors to argue energetically that the collapse of the Weimar Republic was in no way inevitable, that Germany's democracy had always had a good chance of surviving and that there was a significant difference between statesmen such as Gustav Stresemann and Adolf Hitler. With a chief interest in foreign policy, John always emphasised the importance of ideology and deliberate decision-making in historical processes rather than impersonal forces. He also wanted to release the understanding of Germany's relationship with Eastern Europe from being formulated disproportionately in the context of the Nazi period, a problem that has tended to afflict Anglo-Saxon academics and their audiences especially.¹

As an undergraduate, John Hiden had attended Hull University, where he was influenced by A.G. Dickens and Frank Spencer (a student of Lewis Namier). The latter recommended that John pursue a PhD about Germany and the Baltic States. He took the advice and moved to the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, where he was supervised by Francis Carsten. Having spent a year researching at the European Institute, Mainz, John's PhD was awarded in 1971 and contained the research which was published some years later as *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik* (1987). The study laid the foundations for his interest in the Baltic region, an interest which would become decisive in his future career.

When the Baltic States made their transition to independence from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, John proved ideally suited to interpreting the present and future of the revolutionary events occurring in this crucial part of Europe in the light of their experiences from the inter-war period. As the Soviet Union imploded, John was quick to recognise the similarity of this process with the disintegration of the Tsarist Empire at the end of the First World War. He was aware, through his research on the history of the Baltic States, that Tsarist Russia's demise had been the Baltics' opportunity. He saw, as few others did, that the process begun by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union might produce the same outcome for the Baltics. He was determined to offer what practical help he could to further this process and to help build the economic and political foundations for viable independent states.

¹ For the record, John also had an interest in the history of British foreign policy. In conversation he would insist tenaciously that the UK has always had a deep interest in the events which unfold in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Hence during the period of transition, John engaged himself decisively with the Baltic region, travelling extensively there and publishing for wide audiences about an area which, typically, was too little understood in the English-speaking world. In co-operation with Alexander Loit he edited *The Baltic States in International Relations between the Two World Wars* (1987) and *Contact or Isolation? Soviet-Western Relations in the Interwar Period* (1991); with Patrick Salmon he produced the extremely timely *The Baltic Nations and Europe* (1991); and with Thomas Lane (Bradford) he edited *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War* (1992). Later, with David Smith and Vahur Made, he edited *The Baltic Question during the Cold War* (2008).

But John's ambitions were not restricted to academic publishing. During the earlier phase of transition, news of events in the Baltic States was transmitted to the West almost exclusively by Soviet media and by Western correspondents based in Moscow. In response, John's ambition became to transmit accurate information to Western business, media and governments from a Baltic perspective. To achieve this, John established the Baltic Research Unit in the Department of European Studies at Bradford University in 1988. With the help of a couple of colleagues and a part-time secretary John developed contacts in universities and government departments and then organized a number of Baltic conferences in Britain with the assistance of the Department of Trade and Industry, the East European Trade Council and Bradford Metropolitan Council. These allowed government and business representatives from Western Europe to learn first-hand about political developments and business opportunities in the fledgling independent economies.

Out of these conferences emerged the journal *Baltic Briefing* edited by John with contributions from government ministers, academics and business representatives from the Baltic States and Baltic specialists in Western Europe. The aim was to provide accurate information about economic opportunities in the Baltic States as a way of consolidating their newly-achieved independence in 1991. From his knowledge of events 70 years earlier John was confident that enterprise would flourish in the Baltic States once the Soviet depredations had been overcome. He persuaded the Bradford Council to accept an invitation from the then Estonian Foreign Minister, Lennart Meri, to carry out an 'economic audit' of Estonia to pinpoint areas where investment would have the most fruitful and immediate results. He and his colleagues organized staff and student exchanges between Bradford University and the University of Latvia in Riga and the Estonian Institute in Tallinn, and created a substantial

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Baltic Archive in the Department of European Studies which was later transferred to Glasgow University.

A major resource of the Baltic Research Unit was the three Baltic exile communities in Bradford who offered hospitality to visitors from the Baltic States and enabled them to visit various British institutions and to gain a flavour of life in Britain in the early 1990s. In association with the exile communities John formed the British-Baltic Association in March 1992 whose aim was to promote good relations between Britain and the Baltic states, to raise the profile of the Baltic countries in the U.K., and to disseminate the results of academic research into the politics, economics and history of the Baltic republics.

Throughout this process, John established contacts which included a former Colonel in the KGB. More conventional were: Lennart Meri (Estonian President), Mart Laar (Estonian Prime Minister), Jüri Luik (Estonian Foreign Minister and Defence Minister), Einars Repše (Head of Latvia's Central Bank and later Prime Minister), Normans Penke (Latvian Foreign Minister), Imants Lieģis (Latvia's Justice Minister) and Vygaudas Ušackas (Lithuanian Foreign Minister).

John's activity helped inform and shape British policy towards the Baltic region during the historic period of transition. Through regular briefing meetings with the FCO, the MoD and other government agencies he was able to influence decision-processes.

John's activity led him to become the single most important person establishing Baltic Studies in the UK after the end of the Cold War. In this context, it was natural that his research interests and activity fed into his teaching. In fact, John was an inspiring teacher who preferred discussion and questioning to lecturing—the latter he sometimes dismissed as pontificating. He enjoyed lively discussions with schools audiences, undergraduates and postgraduates alike. He taught German History and Baltic Studies across the ranges at the University of Bradford and ran a very successful doctoral workshop. He established Masters degrees in East European Studies and Baltic Studies at Bradford.

Sadly, this outstanding work was cut short dramatically in 2002. At the time, John was Professor of Modern History and his department—the Department of European Studies at the University of Bradford—gained a five star research rating. Unfortunately a budgetary deficit led the management to close the department and John opted for early retirement, taking up the post of Emeritus Professor of Baltic Studies at Bradford and, since the Baltic Research Unit moved with a younger colleague (David Smith) to Glasgow University, he also became Senior Research Fellow there in 2003.

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Through all the difficulties and into ‘retirement’, John kept working. He pursued interests related to German History in Bradford (producing *Neighbours or Enemies?* with Martyn Housden) and pressed forward with Baltic Studies at Glasgow, for example helping establish the UK Baltic Study Group in 2004. In 2003–04, he was instrumental in setting up the discussions with the Estonian Institute, Tallinn that led to the establishment of an Estonian government-funded lectureship in Estonian Language, Society and Culture at Glasgow University. At Glasgow he collaborated with David Smith in a major project entitled ‘Ending Nationalism? The Quest for Cultural Autonomy in Inter-War Europe’ funded by the AHRC. It examined the neglected Baltic and Central and East European contribution to the theory and practice of multicultural democracy during the 20th century and beyond. The project also took John and David to Bucharest to brief the Romanian government on cultural autonomy as part of discussions on a new minorities law. It also led to joint seminars with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe (2006–07). Finally there was a book (with David Smith) *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State* (2012).

Perhaps, however, John’s most significant publication of all (the one which laid the foundation for his subsequent engagement with cultural autonomy) was produced in 2004 - *Defender of Minorities. Paul Schiemann, 1876–1944*. Here he brought together his career-long interests in German democrats, foreign policy and the Baltic region, as he studied arguably the most famous Baltic German of all. Paul Schiemann promoted the rights of national minorities on national and international platforms across the 1920s and opposed the rise of National Socialism, even suffering house arrest during the Nazi occupation of Latvia during the Second World War yet still managing to save a Jewish girl from the Holocaust (she was employed in the house as a servant). John’s work on Schiemann and cultural autonomy was premised on the view that the Baltic States had political experiences in the 1920s which shed light on those currently being experienced across Europe due to migration and the growth of extensive immigrant communities. The sense of uncertainty and lack of security, the feeling of a need to preserve oneself in the face of change – these were things that had been experienced by national groups in the Baltic States after the First World War, and to study them offered valuable lesson to us all today.

John’s magisterial rendering of Schiemann’s life earned him a prize from the US-based Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. In recognition of John’s outstanding career, in 2011 two colleagues who had also been supervised by him as post-graduate students at Bradford (Martyn Housden and David Smith) produced a *Festschrift*

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(*Forgotten Pages in Baltic History*) which was presented at the Latvian Embassy, London. In Germany he was a member of the *Baltische Historische Kommission*, also of the Latvian Historical Commission. He held awards from the Lithuanian President (Cross of Office for the Order of Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas) and from the Estonian President (Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana) for his work on Baltic history and politics. He also held an honorary doctorate at the University of Klaipeda.

If all of this was not enough, John was a keen musician. His devotion to jazz dated back to the age of 12 and he played the saxophone in a Leeds-based big band. He could sight-read music and played the clarinet. Colleagues remember him punctuating conversations with gestures on an air saxophone. Always interested in crime novels, he was on the brink of publishing his own first title. Called *Town and Gown*, it depicts life at a corrupt university where a young lecturer finds local criminals more honourable than senior academic staff and managers. Naturally it is entirely a work of fiction and not based, in any way, on any of the institutions he had belonged to.

John was always something of an iconoclast. One of his heads of department once likened his behaviour in staff meetings to that of a bright but naughty schoolboy sitting at the back of the class making jokes at the teacher's expense. (John would tend to gravitate towards younger members of staff and whisper to them throughout meetings.) He liked nothing more than puncturing pomposity and ridiculing self-importance. He always had generous instincts and tremendous enthusiasms.

With so much talk of a professional career, there should be no doubt that John Hiden was completely dedicated to his home and family. He was adept at 'do-it-yourself', once converting a loft into living space. He was utterly devoted to his wife, Juliet, his daughter Jessica and his son Hugo.

John William Hiden, historian, was born in London on 21 February 1940. He married Juliet on 21 September 1963 and they had two children, Hugo and Jessica. He died in Leeds on 10 August 2012.