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Defender of Minorities. Paul Schiemann, 1876?1944

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John Hiden?s book on Paul Schiemann, the Baltic German ?defender of minorities?, is a highly welcome contribution not only to the history of Baltic Germans or the Baltic States, but also to European twentieth-century history as a whole. Schiemann was one of the most prominent liberal journalists in Riga, a politician fully devoted to the interests of the German minority *and* his home country, and, as one of the leaders of the European Nationalities Congress, an important spokesman for a peaceful solution to the minority question in the 1920s and 1930s. Unfortunately, until now relatively few articles have been published about Schiemann in (Baltic-) German historiography, although Helmut Kause and Michael Garleff have produced some noteworthy work in this area.(1) Thus it is not the least achievement of Hiden?s study to discover Schiemann for a broader public, for he deserves to become more well known not only as a politician but also as an influential theoretician of nationality with his dream of the ?anational state?, an idea that was quite ahead of his time between the World Wars. Presumably, as Hiden suggests, historians have been neglecting Schiemann and his friends because of the commitment of historiography after 1945 to National Socialists, their forerunners and mentors (p. 96). One may add, on the one hand, that Schiemann may have failed to attract historians? attention because of his special Baltic experience ? so foreign to western observers during the Cold War ? that made him an equally ardent opponent of both German National Socialism and of Soviet socialism. On the other hand, with everybody trying to make sense of just how WWII came about, nobody was inclined to investigate other developments in European interwar politics, for they failed spectacularly

anyway, and thus lost their importance. However, with the focus entirely on the way into catastrophe and the undeniable fact of the war just a few years ahead, historians sometimes lost their sense of the openness of the historical process.

Recent European history has seen a new ?springtime of the peoples?, followed by unexpected, brutal waves of ethnic cleansing thought to be a relic of the long gone past. War, indeed, continues to be predominantly a matter of inner-state conflicts. Hence the interest in such figures as Schiemann seems to be consequent, for they proposed peaceful solutions to minorities? problems that were highly contested then, and sound provocative even today, as the European Union strives to overcome the conflictual legacy of nation states. Simultaneously, EU enlargement into the east has placed new problems with minorities on the European agenda, especially in the Baltic States. It is exactly this frame into which Hiden fits his story of the German Balt Paul Schiemann. However, the reader may regret that there is no thorough analysis of Schiemann?s theories in today?s context. Nevertheless, Hiden devotes a central chapter of his well balanced study to Schiemann?s theoretical world, to which we shall return.

Hiden?s book is no classical biography, for his concern is almost entirely with the development of the *homo politicus* Schiemann. In eleven chapters, Hiden follows his protagonist?s career in interwar Latvia and among its German minority. Paul Schiemann, born 1876, was the son of a lawyer with a decidedly liberal background who, in his younger days, fought against the dominance of the German aristocracy in Russia?s Baltic provinces. Paul?s uncle was the eminent historian Theodor Schiemann, who later emigrated to Germany where he became a political adviser to Wilhelm II. It was at the very beginning of the twentieth century that Paul made his first steps into journalism, and under the influence of the revolutionary events of 1905 he developed one of his axioms that was fundamentally opposed to the Baltic German mainstream in those days: ?natural evolution? will lead to a necessary change in the regional constitution of the small German population of the Baltic provinces, i.e. the loss of their dominant influence on the fate of the provinces. Consequently, he argued, it has to be the precondition of any Baltic German policy to recognise an essential community of interest between Germans and Latvians or Estonians respectively. This understanding of national relationships in the Baltic region was crucial for Schiemann?s contribution to nationality theory later in his career, and it was just a consequence of his convictions that he backed Latvian claims for national independence in late 1918.

Latvian independence changed the conditions of Schiemann?s work. As editor-in-chief of the daily *Rigasche Rundschau* he commented on the political life of the young republic. As leader of the ?German Balt Democratic Party? he also became one of the most influential Latvian Germans in practicising democracy. He was even asked to form a government in 1927 at a time of parliamentary crisis, but refused because of the too slight majority of votes he could expect. Remaining entirely loyal to his convictions he managed to persuade the majority of more conservative German Balts who remained in independent Latvia to cooperate. And yet they never endorsed Schiemann?s course wholeheartedly. He convinced them to follow a common German policy and forged them into the ?Committee of German Balt Parties? in order to coordinate their work and to avoid their split ? a fate that diminished the influence of other national minorities like the Russians and Jews, to the disappointment of Schiemann, who had hoped to put forward the minorities? agenda in a joint effort. Thus he had to fight on two fronts for, his loyalty to Latvia notwithstanding, it was easy for Latvian parties or journalists to play with popular anti-German sentiments. More than once the government tried to gain popular support with anti-German measures like the Latvianisation of churches, and it was especially in these times that Schiemann had serious problems keeping the conservative German Balts calm. Against this background, together with the rise of Hitler?s party in Germany, it became obvious that for Baltic Germans, in Hiden?s terms, the step from being a cultural to a national outpost was ?unexpectedly small? (p. 178). As the national discourse in Latvia became more and more dominant, Schiemann?s isolation in his home country and the German community alike increased successively.

This was equally so in the international arena. In the European Nationalities Congress, becoming more and more focused on German minorities? issues, delegates no longer wanted to hear Schiemann?s famous idea of an ?anational state?. Behind this term stood Schiemann?s theory that, as with religion, the choice of an

individual?s nationality was a matter of his emotional conviction. Thus he demanded that the state not interfere in this personal issue: just as the modern a-religious state offered freedom of conscience, ?the anational state would provide the necessary freedom to practice one?s culture? (p. 133). Schiemann did not think that a national minority needed any territory, but he was convinced that it needed the freedom to use its language in the constitutional frames of a cultural autonomy. In fact, within this concept, state borders would lose their meaning, as Schiemann was conceiving European unity in terms of networks of co-nationals as a guarantee for peaceful development. However, it was just this notion of, in modern terms, transborder-communities that made the whole Nationalities Congress under Schiemann?s lead vulnerable to the accusation of being ?a pan-German Trojan horse? (p. 137). Faced with the fact that under his successors the Congress was indeed transformed into a pressure group for national interests of German minorities, Schiemann may have finally understood that his ideas appeared inconceivable to the majority of his contemporaries. In 1937 he eventually concluded that national minorities ?have ceased to be, or to want to be, in charge of their own policy, and have become objects of European states policy? (p. 224). Thus the minorities question, far from being resolved, continued to be a threat to peace in Europe.

Forced to leave Latvia in 1933 because of a combination of poor health and Nazi demands to coordinate the work of German press abroad, Schiemann settled in Austria. In 1938 he had to return, for he was in danger of being imprisoned in a concentration camp after the Nazi *Anschluss*. Not surprisingly, Schiemann was one of those who choose to refuse the resettlement order for Baltic Germans after the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939. In an interview he explained that he had believed it to be an injustice to desert his home country at such a critical time to go to a country ?that is contrary to our idea of religion, of the conduct of life and justice? (p. 233). After having survived the first year of Soviet occupation, he shared the fate of the Latvians also under German occupation before he eventually died in 1944. Under surveillance of the authorities he nevertheless managed to hide a Jewish girl, Valentina Freimane, at his home, for which act he was honoured as ?Righteous among the Nations? by Yad Vashem in 2000. He remained loyal to his convictions even in his private life.

And yet, Hiden is right in naming him a ?forgotten European? (p. 250). Today, Scheimann?s ideas are of direct interest not only for an integrating Europe lacking a cohesive general minorities? legislation, but also for the re-established Baltic States. However, Hiden seems a little superficial in claiming that the russophone minorities in today?s Latvia and Estonia ?have yet to pass Schiemann?s test for good citizenship? because they would not perceive themselves as members of these countries? communities. As many studies suggest, the process of mental integration among russophones as inhabitants of their respective countries is going well, although, of course, is far from complete. In any case, one could provocatively suggest that the russophone?s wish to integrate is stronger than the willingness of Estonians or Latvians willingness to accept ?their? minorities. But Schiemann?s important notion that the Minorities Congress was no ?union of repressed peoples? may be useful especially for russophones in the Baltic countries. By coming to terms with their position in their new home countries as self-confident citizens, they will hopefully be accepted by the respective countries? majorities.

In conclusion, some final critical remarks that may be more relevant to the publisher than the author: this book opens a special passage into a ?forgotten Europe?, which was by no means marginal in the interwar period, for readers who are presumably not at all familiar with Baltic history. Especially for them it would have been useful to provide a glossary, a list of abbreviations and a table of Latvian governments from 1918 to 1940. However, these points aside, this political biography of Paul Schiemann is extremely useful for our understanding of the contribution of the special Baltic experience that he shared with many other figures of the minorities? movement. Old Europe should be prepared for new ideas that will hopefully be communicated from the new small member-states of the European Union.

Notes

1. M. Garleff, ?Deutschbaltische Publizisten: Ewald Ammende ? Werner Hasselblatt ? Paul Schiemann?, *Berichte und Forschungen*, 2 (1994), pp. 189?229; H. Kause, ?Der publizistische Widerstand Paul

Schiemanns gegen den Nationalsozialismus in den deutschen Volksgruppen? in *Deutschbalten, Weimarer Republik und Drittes Reich*, ed. M. Garleff (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 2001), pp. 197?216. Back to (1)

Professor Hiden is very happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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