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[Response to review by Sarah B. Snyder, Yale University, located at: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR231.pdf>]

Author's Response by **Richard Davy, St Antony's College, Oxford University**

I would like to thank Sarah Snyder for taking the trouble to review my article. Unfortunately her review contains a number of misrepresentations and misunderstandings. She correctly writes that I dispute the notion that the Helsinki Final Act represented a codification of the status quo in Europe but she then reports me as "noting that the Eastern European states, like Western powers, hoped the agreement would neutralise the Brezhnev Doctrine".¹ I noted no such thing, and was hardly likely to be so naive, given my experience in the area. What I wrote was that the Western side was determined "to avoid agreeing any text that might seem to endorse this pernicious doctrine". That is quite different: a point of principle that it was important for the West to defend, for obvious reasons. Later I reported a Polish participant as saying that the leaders of Poland and Hungary saw the Final Act as offering "perhaps some protection from the Brezhnev Doctrine". That was their view, and no more than a cautious hope of "some protection", very far from neutralisation.

Dr. Snyder writes that "Davy does not emphasize sufficiently" that freedom for Eastern Europe was "still years away". I covered that obvious point by writing: "In reality, of course, they were permitted none of those things [joining Nato and other freedoms] at the time, but immediate feasibility is not the only test of the value of international texts".

Snyder writes that some of the "myths" I set out to correct are "minor points or valid historical interpretations". I agree that I occasionally quibbled over minor points when

¹ Invented by Leonid Brezhnev to justify the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 on the grounds that the defence of socialism took precedence over national sovereignty.

showing that too few people read the text, but I am puzzled to find Snyder including these quibbles among the myths I set out to correct. I made it clear on the second page that I was disputing three main myths: that the Final Act endorsed the post-war division of Europe; that the human rights texts were largely window dressing; and that at the moment of signature the document was a success for the Soviet Union. These are not “valid historical interpretations” but mistakes too often found in writings on the subject, particularly (but not solely) in the United States.

Dr. Snyder accuses me of not citing “sufficient historical accounts to support [my] argument” and of “lack of engagement with the broader literature on these questions”. I was not attempting a review of scholarly writing. I made it clear that I was concerned primarily with misinterpretations of the text in mainstream histories of the Cold War that reach undergraduates and general readers. I have in fact read nearly all the authors she mentions, and have reviewed the Wenger/Mastny/Nuenlist book.² Altogether I cite more than 36 written and oral sources including two books that contain 25 chapters by specialists whom I have not always cited individually. Most are on Snyder’s list. Doubtless I could have spread the net even wider but many of the writers she mentions address aspects of the Helsinki process that are not directly relevant to my article. Some, such as Möckli³ (excellent otherwise), occasionally slip in remarks to the effect that Helsinki acknowledged or endorsed the territorial and political status quo, which is why Americans were not my only target.

European authors who touch on my area of discussion often support my case (directly or by implication) and sometimes straddle the fence. Wenger and Mastny, for instance, write on page 19 that “while the Final Act legitimized the status quo [which I dispute] it ...also included a vision of how it might eventually be overcome peacefully”. This qualification is vital. It reminds me that I should have admitted to more of the ambiguities in the Final Act (one can get carried away when making a case) but my conclusion would still have been that the Final Act was strongly weighted in favour of change. In fact, I am rashly tempted to suggest that one could probably argue my case with almost no references to secondary sources because, with a bit of exegesis, the text speaks for itself.

Another of Snyder’s allegations relates to Zubok’s assertion that “the Western countries agreed to accept the territorial and political status quo in Eastern Europe.”⁴ She writes (though there is an ambiguity in this passage that I may have misunderstood) that this error does not “seem to rise to the level of ‘myths’ in need of correction”. Of course the issue of recognising or not recognising the status quo was central to the negotiations and

² Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny and Christian Nuenlist, ed., *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965-75* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 19.

³ Daniel Möckli, ‘The EC Nine, the CSCE and the changing pattern of European security’ in *Origins of the European Security System...* (see note 2): 155.

⁴ Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007: 237.

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to the acrimonious debates that surrounded them. As I wrote in my article, endorsing the status quo “would have been a massive betrayal of the peoples of Eastern Europe and everything that the Western alliance claimed to stand for”. In that context I cannot imagine any myth more badly in need of correction than the myth that the Final Act endorsed the status quo.

Later Snyder quotes me as saying that the Final Act would have been a paper exercise “without strong external support”. What I wrote was that “pressure grew quickly among very courageous people inside the bloc”. Outside support came later, as I mentioned, largely as a result of internal pressure. She also writes that “Gaddis’s characterization of the Helsinki Final Act is not an outlying view”. Yes, that is precisely my complaint (which is not to say that I don’t respect other aspects of Gaddis’s work).

In the same paragraph Snyder accuses me of not demonstrating “that diplomats at the time foresaw that meaningful change would result from the agreement.... much evidence exists to suggest that those who negotiated the Helsinki Final [Act] were surprised by its long-term significance”. There is a misunderstanding here. One needs to distinguish between two time-frames: immediate reactions to the Final Act and the role it played in longer-term change. The Helsinki process belongs in the matrix of factors that eventually brought change to Europe. Where it fits, and how much it contributed, is the subject of interesting debates that I explicitly ruled out of my article in the third paragraph. (For the same reason I do not accept Snyder’s criticism that I failed to analyse the role of the review meetings “in transforming the Helsinki process”. I attended the meetings in Belgrade and Madrid but they were beyond the clearly stated scope of my article.)

In fact I never stated that diplomats “foresaw that meaningful change would result from the agreement”. I threw in a single quote from an Austrian diplomat who in fact foresaw long-term change, but that was in the context of outlining aims and hopes on the Western side, specifically German, French, British, and Dutch, in order to explain what lay behind the text. I wrote that what kept the Western (I should have said West European) negotiators going was “first, a determination not to endorse the status quo, and then varying levels of hope that some change might be possible, so there was value, they believed, in trying to establish an agenda to promote change or at least a set of criteria for measuring it”. That was about the aims and hopes, not predictions.

Snyder asserts that I treat the Western negotiators too often as “a monolithic group” and ignore Dutch differences with the Americans. I am not sure what she means by “too often” (one cannot differentiate all the time in an article that is focused on different issues), nor why she singles out Dutch/American differences, which were less significant than many others. I devoted a reasonable amount of space to outlining differences among the West Europeans and between them and Washington, even though this was not essential to my argument. I specifically mentioned the Dutch stance, and even, in a separate passage, quoted the Dutch Foreign Minister. No monolith there, though the nine

members of the European Community did become good at bridging their differences to the extent of hammering out a workable consensus for the negotiations.

To return to the subject of surprise, I discussed immediate reactions to the Final Act because they showed how people interpreted the text at the time, which was my primary concern. Were negotiators and close observers surprised by the rapid use to which the document was put by dissidents in Soviet bloc? Although this seems not to be Snyder's issue, or only by implication, the answer is that some were surprised and some not. I wrote carefully that a few people with knowledge of the tensions in Eastern Europe "had glimpses of what was to come". On this issue I quoted a senior British diplomat, other unnamed experts in London and my own prediction. Certainly those of us who knew members of opposition groups in Eastern Europe were less surprised than others by the eagerness with which those brave people seized on the Final Act to promote their cause. But that was quite different from predicting long-term significance, which depended on many other factors.

I also devoted some space to discussing immediate reactions inside the Warsaw Pact, where the subversive meaning of the Final Act was often better understood than in the West. Here Snyder invokes a chapter by Savranskaya in support but quotes only from the title: "Unintended consequences..."⁵ What Savranskaya actually shows is that, while the consequences were obviously unintended when Moscow embarked on the negotiations, by the time the Final Act was ready for signature the KGB and others foresaw trouble ahead, as did (according to the evidence I reported) security services and other officials in Eastern Europe. So there were people on both sides of the negotiations who were not surprised by the immediate aftermath, largely because they understood the text and knew the ground on which it would fall.

Perhaps it is worth making a general point here that goes beyond my article. At the time many Americans were more pessimistic than West Europeans about the Helsinki process because they tended to believe in the immutability of the communist systems or anyway their imperviousness to external pressures.⁶ From that followed the logical conclusion, reached by Dr. Kissinger and many others, that there was no point in the CSCE attempting to induce internal change in the Soviet empire. I often felt that this view was shaped by too much focus on the Soviet Union, where the power structure was strong, organised dissent weak, and change seemed unlikely in the near future.

⁵ Svetlana Savranskaya, 'Unintended Consequences: Soviet Interests, Expectations and Reactions to the Helsinki Final Act' in Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart, ed. *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.

⁶ I will suggest one of many sources: M. C. Morgan, 'North America, Atlanticism and the making of the Helsinki Final Act' in *Origins of the European Security System...* (see note 2), 31-32. But I cannot resist mentioning that Morgan appears not to have read the text of the Final Act because, in his otherwise illuminating analysis, he writes erroneously on page 33 that the freer flow of ideas was included in Basket III.

By contrast, West Europeans were preoccupied with conditions in Eastern Europe, where restless colonies chafed under the rule of a backward power. There, control in several countries was weaker than in the Soviet Union, opposition more active, and the potential for change greater, even, sometimes, within the variable limits imposed by the Soviet Union. Among those West Europeans who supported the CSCE (not all did, of course), the principal purpose was to induce change in Eastern Europe by pursuing a widescreen version of Chancellor Brandt's Ostpolitik, the slogan of which was "change through rapprochement". Estimates of the probability of success varied enormously among individuals, as I showed, but it was obvious from at least the mid-seventies that pressure was building up in Eastern Europe and that the costs of Moscow's empire were rising. At the same time a younger and better educated generation was approaching the threshold of power in the Soviet Union with less emotional attachment than their fathers to the hard-won conquests of the Second World War. So, from inside the Soviet empire and geographically closer to it, the situation looked less frozen than it appeared to many distant commentators.

Thus it was not unrealistic to hope that the Final Act might give history a nudge in the right direction. Even so, I remained cautious about the longer-term prospects, so it was not until 18 December 1980 (five years after the Final Act and five years before Gorbachev) that I felt able to venture a prediction in *The Times* that a new leader might reassess the Soviet commitment to Eastern Europe.

In conclusion, returning to Snyder's review, what I find particularly surprising is that nowhere does she attempt to engage with my main argument. Clearly she disagrees with it because she remarks almost casually in a note that "the Helsinki Final Act did not challenge the political status quo in Europe". Since one of the central points of my article was to contest precisely that common assertion, I would have expected disagreement to be backed up by argument and evidence. In their absence I rest my case.

Richard Davy worked for *The Times* (London) from 1955-84 as a foreign correspondent in Germany, Washington and Eastern Europe and as a foreign specialist in London. He covered the CSCE negotiations and wrote about them for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, where he became an Associate Fellow. He was also a Specialist Adviser to a parliamentary committee examining the Helsinki Final Act. As a guest scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC he wrote on U.S. policy towards Eastern Europe and was subsequently a Senior Adviser on a project on Eastern Europe for the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies.

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