

**Richard Davy.** "Helsinki Myths: Setting the Record Straight on the Final Act of the CSCE, 1975." *Cold War History* 9:1 (February 2009): 1-22.

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Review by **Sarah B. Snyder, Yale University**

**R**ichard Davy's article, "Helsinki Myths: Setting the Record Straight on the Final Act of the CSCE, 1975," examines divergent interpretations of the Helsinki Final Act at the time it was signed in 1975 and attempts to summarize how it is regarded by historians today. Davy's article offers a brief introduction to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), including Eastern and Western objectives for the negotiations as well as the mechanics of the talks. In his discussion, Davy draws upon his experience covering the CSCE negotiations as a correspondent for *The Times* (of London). Davy's article helpfully focuses attention on the content of the agreement, which he rightly points out was little understood at the time and understudied for many subsequent years. In his conclusion, Davy argues the Helsinki Final Act's long-term significance is due to Western European diplomatic efforts during negotiating sessions in Finland and Switzerland in the 1970s, which successfully transformed the substance of the CSCE agenda.<sup>1</sup>

The article's abstract suggests Davy takes issue with the interpretations of "American historians of the Cold War," though Davy addresses what he sees as the shortfalls of the scholarship of a range of authors, not all of whom are American or focus on the Cold War. Davy correctly asserts that political observers at the time misunderstood the Helsinki Final Act as an acquiescence to the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and domination of Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> Davy goes further and disputes the notion that the Helsinki Final Act represented a codification of the status quo in Europe, noting that Eastern European states, like Western powers, hoped the agreement would neutralize the

<sup>1</sup> Davy too often talks about "Western negotiators" as a monolithic group; it is important to note that the Dutch approach to the CSCE negotiations was very different than the American. (15)

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion, see Sarah B. Snyder, *The Helsinki Process, American Foreign Policy, and the End of the Cold War* (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2006), 78-92.

Brezhnev Doctrine. Yet, very few political observers believed the Soviets would refrain from intervention based on a non-binding commitment made in the Helsinki Final Act.<sup>3</sup> Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary may, as Davy writes, have had “the right to change their political systems, leave the Warsaw Pact and opt for neutrality or even join NATO,” but the freedom to do so was still years away, when a very different leader occupied the Kremlin, a point that Davy does not emphasize sufficiently. (10)

Davy suggests traditional interpretations of the Helsinki Final Act as a concession to the Soviets still dominate appraisals of the agreement, but does not cite sufficient historical accounts to support his argument. His article, and especially his introduction, would be strengthened by clearer delineation of the scholarship with which he disagrees, as Davy’s lack of engagement with the broader literature on these questions weakens his article. Davy’s review of the literature is episodic and not systematic, focusing on recent, broadly-conceived works, rather than examining scholarship more closely focused on the CSCE.<sup>4</sup> Davy’s analysis primarily addresses recent works by Tony Judt, Melvyn Leffler, Vladislav Zubok, John Lewis Gaddis, and Ralf Dahrendorf.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the “myths” that Davy has set out to correct often seem to be minor points or valid historical interpretations. For example, Davy criticizes Leffler’s work for mistakenly locating respect for human rights in the Helsinki Final Act’s third basket, as many accounts mistakenly do (Davy cites others in his article). This is a minor flaw in Leffler’s work, and Davy does not disagree with Leffler’s interpretation of the agreement overall.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Davy accurately notes that Zubok flubs the CSCE’s name and does not

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<sup>3</sup> After a lengthy and detailed discussion of the language of the Helsinki Final Act, Davy notes the agreement “conferred no new status, legal or otherwise, on the states and frontiers of Europe.” (9) True but conversely, the Helsinki Final Act did not challenge the political status quo in Europe either.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Wanda Jarzabek, “Home and Reality: Poland and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1964-1989,” (Cold War International History Project, Working Paper Number 56, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars); Angela Romano, *From Détente in Europe to European Détente: How the West Shaped the Helsinki CSCE* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); Thomas Fischer, “‘A Mustard Seed Grew into a Bushy Tree’: The Finnish CSCE Initiative of 5 May 1969,” *Cold War History* (forthcoming, available now through iFirst); Snyder, *The Helsinki Process, American Foreign Policy, and the End of the Cold War*; Jussi Hanhimäki, “‘They Can Write It in Swahili’: Kissinger, The Soviets, and the Helsinki Accords, 1973-1975,” *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 1:1 (2003): 37-58; Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart, ed., *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); and Andreas Wenger, Vojtech Mastny, and Christian Nuenlist, ed., *Origins of the European Security System: The Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965-75* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005); Melvyn Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union and the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> In CSCE terminology, basket refers to a range of issues grouped together for negotiating purposes. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms was enshrined in Principle Seven of Basket One. Leffler’s account is surprisingly muddled, perhaps because he relied on secondary sources rather than reading the text of the agreement itself. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind*, 511n. Leffler bases his account on

clarify how Principle Three, regarding to the inviolability of borders, relates to Zubok's assertion that "Western countries agreed to accept the territorial and political status quo in Eastern Europe."<sup>7</sup> Davy's points, however, do not seem to rise to the level of "myths" in need of correction.

More substantively, Davy disagrees with the depiction by Gaddis and others that the consequences of the Helsinki Final Act were "unexpected," yet Davy does not demonstrate that diplomats at the time foresaw that meaningful change would result from the agreement. Instead, he outlines the concessions they secured in CSCE negotiating sessions and concedes the Helsinki Final Act could have been a "paper exercise" without strong external support. (15) Gaddis' characterization of the Helsinki Final Act is not an outlying view and much evidence exists to suggest that those who negotiated the Helsinki Final were surprised by its long-term significance. Indeed, an article by Svetlana Savranskaya, which Davy cites in his bibliography, is entitled "Unintended Consequences: Soviet Interests, Expectations and Reactions to the Helsinki Final Act."<sup>8</sup> Davy may disagree with this interpretation, but as it is espoused by a number of scholars working on the CSCE today, he perhaps needs to address the interpretation more directly.

Davy notes the great significance of Basket Four, which included a mechanism for a follow-up meeting, without analyzing the role of the review meetings in transforming the Helsinki process. The follow-up meeting in Belgrade (1977-1978), set by the fourth basket, and those that were held subsequently could have allowed Eastern states the opportunity to tout their efforts at reform. Instead, human rights activists and sympathetic diplomats intervened, reframing the agreement and utilizing the meetings for different purposes. Beginning at Belgrade, diplomats at the CSCE review meetings assessed the degree to which the Helsinki Final Act had been implemented and criticized those states whose records suggested willful disregard for the agreement's provisions. Eventually the follow-up meetings became highly embarrassing to Soviet and Eastern European leaders, encouraging regimes to undertake reform.

Davy's "Helsinki Myths" articulates his frustration with existing historical accounts of the CSCE. Yet, his commentary could as easily be a criticism of historical surveys rather than Helsinki scholarship per se; his review raises questions about how well such works can

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William Hitchcock's, which also misstates the agreement's baskets. William Hitchcock, *The Struggle for Europe: The Turbulent History of a Divided Continent, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 301.

<sup>7</sup> Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya, "Unintended Consequences: Soviet Interests, Expectations and Reactions to the Helsinki Final Act," in Bange and Niedhart, ed. *Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe, 175-190*. See also Svetlana Savranskaya, "Human Rights Movement in the USSR After the Signing of the Helsinki Final Act, and the Reaction of Soviet Authorities," in Leopoldo Nuti, ed. *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 30; and Michael Cotey Morgan, "The United States and the Making of the Helsinki Final Act," in Frederik Logevall and Andrew Preston, ed. *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 177.

master the finer details and nuances of a broad span of history. On the other hand, Davy does not address the work of scholars such as Douglas Selvage, Christian Nuenlist, Michael Morgan, Angela Romano, Jeremi Suri, Jussi Hanhimäki, Wanda Jarzabek, Thomas Fischer, and others who have examined the CSCE in considerable depth in recent years. For Davy's argument to be effective, he needs to undertake a broader review of the literature on the CSCE. The state of Helsinki scholarship, at least to this reader, does not seem as bleak as Davy argues.

**Sarah Snyder** received her Ph.D. from Georgetown University in 2006 and specializes in transnational, international, transatlantic, and diplomatic history. She is currently serving as a Cassius Marcellus Clay Fellow in the Department of History at Yale University. Dr. Snyder is finishing a manuscript that analyzes how the 1975 Helsinki Final Act spurred the development of a transnational network devoted to human rights advocacy and the network's contributions to the end of the Cold War. She is also working on a project examining increased attention to human rights in United States foreign policy across the long 1960s. She previously earned a M.A. from the University College London in 2000 and a B.A. with honors from Brown University in 1999.

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