

2012

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

Author's Response

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Response to No. 327 and 345

Published on **29 February 2012**

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and
Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editors: George Fujii

{Updated on 5 March 2012 to add Ang Cheng Guan's response to this response}

Author's Response to:

Sophie Quinn-Judge's review of Pierre Asselin. "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique." *Cold War History* 11:2 (May 2011): 155-195.

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR327.pdf>

Ang Cheng Guan's review of Pierre Asselin. "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era." *Journal of Cold War History* 13:4 (Fall 2011)

<http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR345.pdf>

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR327-AR345-response.pdf>

Author's Response by **Pierre Asselin**, Hawai'i Pacific University

In the past year, two of my articles have been reviewed for H-Diplo. It is an honor to see my work critically engaged by my peers, and I truly appreciate the time and effort those peers invested in putting together their reviews.

Having said that, I wish that my two colleagues who reviewed my articles had actually done that: reviewed my articles. As it turns out, each only briefly and superficially addressed the contents of the article, and proceeded to write at length about issues only tangentially related to my subject matter. In her review of my article on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) and the 1954 Geneva Conference, Sophie Quinn-Judge claims that "Asselin ignores the influence of [French Prime Minister] Pierre Mendès France on the [Geneva] negotiations," and thus she wonders whether my article "gives a true representation of the Geneva process." Well, my article is not about the Geneva process; it is instead about the role of the DRVN in the Geneva talks, as the introduction – to say nothing of the title – makes clear.

In his recent review of my article on DRVN diplomacy in the Nixon era, Ang Cheng Guan spends more time relating the state of the secret Paris talks in 1971, using information

drawn from his own work on that period, than he does discussing the substance of my piece. Interestingly, of seven footnotes in his review, five reference his work.

Besides, my purpose in that article was not to go into details about the secret/private Paris talks (I did that in my book *A Bitter Peace*) but rather to address the larger diplomatic circumstances beyond the negotiations themselves. As I state in the introduction, the purpose of my article is to relate “the story of Hanoi’s ‘diplomatic struggle’ – the foreign policy initiatives undertaken to meet the aims of the [anti-American] resistance – and of its march toward a negotiated settlement of the war with the United States.” Unfortunately, that purpose is not made clear in Ang’s review.

I would ask Quinn-Judge and Ang: What of the quality of my source material? Are there sources I missed? What of the validity and persuasiveness of those core arguments I present? Are my contributions to the historiography of the subject matter useful? To illustrate, Ang, who has produced excellent work on the DRVN before and during the Vietnam War, writes that “Asselin found that the French diplomatic archives contain a substantial amount of insightful reports on Hanoi’s foreign policy.” Given his expertise I am curious to know, as any reader of his review is likely to wonder, does he agree with my contention? Are the French documents I use indeed insightful? Do they add anything new to our understanding of DRVN diplomacy? Or am I misguided in making that contention?

While it is perfectly fine to highlight the lacunae in works under review, reviewers should remind themselves that ultimately we read reviews to get a sense of the contents of new books and articles, of their merits and shortcomings, of their strengths and weaknesses. We read reviews to know what is in a work without having to read it, to help us decide whether to procure a copy of that work. If what reviewers have to add to the subject matter is so important that it must be articulated at length, then perhaps they should make the articulation not in a review, but in articles of their own.

I have nothing but respect for Quinn-Judge, Ang, and others who take time from their busy schedules to review the works peers. But for the exercise to be constructive for all, perhaps it would be best if they focused on the works under consideration in their reviews.

Best & Aloha,
Pierre

Pierre Asselin
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{The following remarks by Ang Cheng Guan were published by H-Diplo on 5 March 2012}

I wish to briefly respond to Pierre Asselin. I have benefitted much from his scholarship on the Vietnam War over the years and therefore wish to make some clarification. I am a bit puzzled by his response since I did engage his article and acknowledge the contribution of the article. In my review, I highlighted that Asselin's use of French and Bulgarian documents is the most interesting and refreshing aspect of this article. Much of the essay after the Introduction, which I described as "a stimulating introduction which I found most interesting", was a long and detailed narrative tracing and explaining what led the North Vietnamese leadership eventually to decide to seriously negotiate after dragging its feet from 1968 through 1972. At least, that was how I read it. I therefore briefly inserted my own understanding of the development of events/of the narrative to show (and I also indicated) that we mostly concur even though we used different sets of sources. On Nixon's Vietnamization policy, I wrote that Asselin offers a brief but insightful analysis and that "Asselin devotes a considerable portion of his article to Sino-Vietnamese relations and the Sino-U.S. rapprochement, and rightly so". I further wrote in my conclusion that "I enjoyed reading Asselin's narrative and agree with much of what he wrote..." I don't have substantial disagreements with it except for the issue of privileging diplomacy. In my view, the French and Bulgarian sources certainly enhanced and nuanced the narrative but I don't think it changed substantially what we, or at least those familiar with the subject, already know.

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