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Review by **Sophie Quinn-Judge**, Temple University

Pierre Asselin's main contention in this article is that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was a full partner in the negotiations and compromises that shaped the Geneva Agreements in the summer of 1954. "...It was not, as western scholars have maintained, acting against its own better judgement or strategic imperatives"(155). He cites the work of Francois Joyaux (1979), based on French archives, as a typical example of that interpretation. Asselin pays less attention to the complaints of Vietnamese critics over the years that the Geneva Agreement gave away the D.R.V.'s military advantage after the Dien Bien Phu victory in exchange for a weak political agreement.¹ One of his targets seems to be the Vietnamese complaint, often expressed during the years of conflict with China over Cambodia, that Zhou Enlai pressured them to make too many concessions at Geneva, in particular to accept an unfair demarcation line. The author discounts such views, believing that they conveniently "deflected criticism as the Accords fell apart" (183).

Asselin argues that the D.R.V. leadership was, in fact, reasonably happy with their gains at the conference table, not the least of which was "French recognition of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam" (183). He cites the Pentagon's analysis which argued that the D.R.V. assumed that a "stable regime in the southern zone would never be formed" (177), a situation that would have increased southern pressure for national

¹ This charge, made frequently in 1963, is documented by Martin Grossheim in "'Revisionism' in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives," in *Cold War History* Vol. 5 No. 4 (Nov. 2005), 454-455.

reunification. Using Vietnamese documents as well as foreign sources, Asselin focuses his argument on what he interprets as the D.R.V.'s weakness vis-à-vis the French and makes much of the threat presented by the appointment of the anti-French nationalist, Ngo Dinh Diem, as Prime Minister in the French-created government of Bao Dai. He credits this appointment on 19 June 1954 as the cause of a D.R.V. shift in its negotiating stance. (168) He buttresses his analysis with figures showing the relative weakness of the armed forces of the D.R.V. and its allies (310,000 for all of Indochina), compared to the far larger combined force of the French contingent (190,000 in Indochina) and the Vietnamese forces recruited by Bao Dai's State of Vietnam (178). The latter grew from 22,000 men in 1949 to 292,000 in 1954 (181). His point that the war was becoming "increasingly fratricidal" as the French Vietnamized their military is an original one. But none of his evidence supporting this point mentions the changes on the ground in Vietnam during the month of June, when French morale was ebbing and France's Vietnamese troops were disintegrating.²

Part of what shapes the author's view of the D.R.V.'s vulnerability is his reading of the documents of the communist party's Sixth Plenum, which occurred just days before the final handshakes in Geneva. A report by Ho Chi Minh and a longer analysis by party General Secretary Truong Chinh present all the reasons why the leadership chose the course of peace and compromise. Truong Chinh singled out deficiencies in the ideological education of the rank-and-file troops and the need for "massing up more main forces, expanding arms, and improving the quality of local militias" (180). He also underlined the threat of greater American involvement in Indochina and the wisdom of signing an imperfect settlement "to foil American ambitions in Indochina" (171). Throughout the conference the American threat had been the major argument put forward by the Soviets and Chinese to moderate the negotiating stance of their Vietnamese allies.

Overall, Pierre Asselin casts serious doubt on the assumption, common in the West and in Vietnam, that the Soviets and Chinese brought heavy-handed pressure to bear in order to win Hanoi's acquiescence to the Geneva Accords. His article, indeed, brings a better documented view of the D.R.V.'s thinking to the discussion than scholars have had previously, thanks to the publication of a more complete set of the series *Van Kien Dang [Party Documents]* from 1996 onwards. But I think that in reaching his conclusion, he neglects the difficult negotiating process (which is laid out in the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' own study, a document he cites selectively). He relies on the report by

² This change is detailed in an internal study from Hanoi: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Dau Tranh Ngoai Giao Trong Cach Manh Dan Toc Dan Chu Nhan Dan (1945-1954)*, Tap Hai [*The Diplomatic Struggle As Part of the People's National Democratic Revolution (1945-1954)*], Vol. Two, (Hanoi, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976,) 31-32. I am citing the Cold War International History Project translation by Merle L. Pribbenow. This document is not available on the web – I received a copy of the translation (draft) at a conference organized by CWIHP on the Geneva Conference and secured Christian Ostermann's agreement to quote from it.

Truong Chinh, a text prepared to defend the D.R.V.'s concessions at Geneva, presented to the party just before the final conference sessions. One could see this as the party's effort to put a positive spin on the Accords. But in both Sixth Plenum reports printed in *Party Documents*, the leaders caution against "leftist" attitudes to the peace agreement, such as the idea that the DRV should continue fighting to avoid partition.³ There clearly was opposition. For one thing, the Viet Minh evacuation from some of their oldest "free zones" below the 17th parallel cannot have been an easy sell.

While Asselin shows that the DRV was consulted at most stages of the negotiations and was able to formulate its own positions, I wonder whether his article gives a true representation of the Geneva process. My reservations regarding Asselin's argument are linked to aspects of the conference history that he leaves out of his account. These are (1) the French position and attitude to the negotiations, and (2) the D.R.V. negotiators' desire for a dividing line no higher than the 16th parallel. Additionally, I would suggest that we need to consider the internal political situation in the D.R.V. before we can adequately judge the factors that contributed to the decision to accept partition.

On the first point, Asselin ignores the influence of Pierre Mendès France on the negotiations, after he was appointed to head the French government on 18 June 1954. He arrived on the scene determined to bring peace to Indochina and set a thirty-day deadline to reach an agreement. Thus, it seems clear that the French needed a settlement at least as urgently as did the D.R.V. He had a high degree of support among the French public, and in late June, France began to move its forces out of parts of Tonkin. As the Vietnamese noted, on 21 June "the enemy began to reduce the size of the area he occupied in the southern portion of the Tonkin lowlands. The enemy abandoned 175 different positions...On 30 June the enemy abandoned Phat Diem, Bui Chu, Ninh Binh and Thai Binh." In enemy occupied areas, "Large chunks of the puppet army disintegrated and tens of thousands of puppet soldiers deserted to accompany their families in the enemy's retreat from the southern portion of the Tonkin lowlands."⁴

Mendès France was by no means capitulating, but rather was preparing for serious negotiations by reducing the exposure of the French expeditionary force. According to the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry and the *Pentagon Papers*, it was the change in the French position, and not the appointment of Diem, that concentrated Soviet and Chinese thinking on a quick solution,. Mendès France also put pressure on the U.S. to support him by sending its representative back to Geneva. He let it be known that if no agreement were reached by 20 July, he would introduce a bill to send draftees to Indochina, as early as 25 July.⁵ In general, the communist allies viewed the Mendès France government as a

³ Dang Cong San Vietnam, *Van Kien Dang*, [Party Documents], vol. 15 (1954), "Report to the Sixth Plenum" by Ho Chi Minh" (Hanoi: NXB Chinh Tri Quoc Gia), 2001, 170.

⁴ *The Diplomatic Struggle*, 31, 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

positive opportunity to get an agreement. As Truong Chinh reported to the Sixth Plenum, “We must not miss this excellent opportunity. We must not allow the American imperialists and the French warmongers to exploit a prolongation of the Geneva Conference by creating a climate of pessimism and despair in order to sabotage the negotiations.”⁶

On the second point, the Viet Minh’s agreement on the temporary line to demarcate regroupment areas was an issue on which they yielded under pressure. This was one of the three issues that remained unsettled until the very last minute, along with the deadline for nationwide elections, and the nature of the ceasefire in Laos and Cambodia.⁷ According to the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry’s record, there was still disagreement between the Viet Minh and the Chinese as late as the Luizhou meeting from 3-5 July, when Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap met Zhou Enlai and other Chinese experts during a break in the conference. On July 9, Ho cabled the delegation in Geneva to suggest a compromise, allowing France “to use Route 9 and the Danang harbor in order to enable us to keep Inter-Zone 5.”⁸ (This stretched from Tuy Hoa in the south to Quang Tri in the north, from the 13th to the 17th parallel and included the home of the D.R.V.’s lead negotiator, Pham Van Dong.) But on 19 July, after failing to budge the French from the 18th parallel, the Vietnamese finally agreed with the Chinese and Soviet delegations on a dividing line near the 17th parallel, north of Route 9, the major route to Laos in Central Vietnam. French agreement to a deadline for general elections in 1956 was probably the trade-off that persuaded the Vietnamese to yield.⁹

Finally, there is the issue of the D.R.V.’s internal politics and how they might have influenced the Geneva process. This is still something we can only speculate about, as the printed documents do not include internal debates. But we know that since 1952 the D.R.V. had been involved in a process of “rectification” [*chinh huan*] aimed at eliminating ideological deviations such as bourgeois attitudes in the ranks of the party and military. As Christopher Goscha shows in his book *Vietnam: un état né de guerre*¹⁰ this was taking a toll on recruits sent to China for officers’ training; from anecdotal evidence we know that many middle-class revolutionaries left the Viet Minh zones in the early fifties, unwilling to put up with this process. The war effort also required a general mobilization that involved forced labor recruitment, a military draft starting in 1949, and by 1953 a new

6 Ibid., 37.

7 Ibid., 38.

8 Ibid., 42.

9 Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. I (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971), 158-159.

10 Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: Un État né de la Guerre, 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), 442.

phase of land reform. The six-month Dien Bien Phu campaign put a heavy burden on civilian auxiliaries and fighters alike. By 1954 the DRV leadership may have felt that the people needed a rest from these waves of mobilization. The partition and decision to hold a general election in 1956 was to have slowed down the pace of the revolution, as newly liberated areas and former Viet Minh zones, soon to be occupied by the French, would have to be handled more carefully than the old base areas. The former goals and slogans of the revolution, such as “resist to the end” would for the time being be replaced by goals emphasizing peace, unification, independence and democracy, as Ho Chi Minh’s report to the Sixth Plenum explained.¹¹ The economic and cultural role of France would be preserved, the D.R.V. would be opened to the scrutiny of an International Control Commission and might escape its reliance on Chinese advisors. Did the nationalist communists such as Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh view this prospect as a positive thing?

As events played out, the party ideologues managed to keep the communist transformation going at full speed in the D.R.V. Their intent seems to have been to consolidate the communist North before the nationwide elections. The D.R.V. remained closely tied to Chinese policy in these years, in its acceptance of peaceful coexistence and the Geneva Accords in 1954, but also in its internal application of policies of class struggle and land reform, policies that left the D.R.V. in a state of crisis by the time the nationwide elections were due to be held. The issue of how willingly the D.R.V. leadership (or different groups within the leadership) embraced these policies is still a puzzle.

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¹¹ Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van Kien Dang*, [Party Documents], vol. 15 (1954). “Report of Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum,” (Hanoi, NXB Chinh Tri Quoc Gia), 168.