

Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam [book review]

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Abstract:

Contested Territory is a fascinating monograph that describes a complex picture of post–World War II local administration in Northwest Vietnam's Black River borderlands through the 1954 Điện Biên Phủ campaign and subsequent land reform and political realignment efforts by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government. Most readers are familiar with the prominent historiographical position that the Điện Biên Phủ campaign occupies in Vietnam's nationalist narrative of casting off French colonial bondage, including accounts of the region's indigenous non-Kinh inhabitants assisting the Việt Minh in defeating the materially superior French. Christian C. Lentz's study recontextualizes the military campaign as a significant midpoint, and not a triumphal endpoint, in the creation of a postcolonial Vietnamese state. In this process, Lentz explores DRV state engagement with local Tai-speaking communities and their Hmong, Khmu, and Dao swidden cultivator neighbors, in a multilayered and dynamic study that draws as much on research methods from anthropology as it does on history or human geography. As Lentz writes, “this study analyzes how the Black River's threefold social formation interacted with downstream forces, generating alliances and exposing fissures that shifted rapidly over time and stretched unevenly across space” (p. 17). Drawing on Thongchai Winichakul's notion of a geobody and related studies of spatial sovereignty, Lentz's exploration of territory as strategy has this reader looking at state formation in the Vietnamese borderlands from a new perspective.

Keywords: book review | Vietnam | Điện Biên Phủ | Northwest Autonomous Zone

Article:

***Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*. By Christian C. Lentz. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019. 352 pp. ISBN: 9780300233957 (cloth).**

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Điện Biên Phủ campaign and subsequent land reform and political realignment efforts by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government. Most readers are familiar with the prominent historiographical position that the Điện Biên Phủ campaign occupies in Vietnam's nationalist narrative of casting off French colonial bondage, including accounts of the region's indigenous non-Kinh inhabitants assisting the Việt Minh in defeating the materially superior French. Christian C. Lentz's study recontextualizes the military campaign as a significant midpoint, and not a triumphal endpoint, in the creation of a postcolonial Vietnamese state. In this process, Lentz explores DRV state engagement with local Tai-speaking communities and their Hmong, Khmu, and Dao swidden cultivator neighbors, in a multilayered and dynamic study that draws as much on research methods from anthropology as it does on history or human geography. As Lentz writes, “this study analyzes how the Black River's threefold social formation interacted with downstream forces, generating alliances and exposing fissures that shifted rapidly over time and stretched unevenly across space” (p. 17). Drawing on Thongchai Winichakul's notion of a geobody and related studies of spatial sovereignty, Lentz's exploration of territory as strategy has this reader looking at state formation in the Vietnamese borderlands from a new perspective.

Lentz describes the physical and social complexity of this region, which had thwarted many lowland governmental efforts to impose direct control over the Black River region. The local Tai prison guard turned Việt Minh Front organizer Lò Văn Mười's idiom, “vast area, sparse people” (*đất rộng, dân thưa*) (p. 28), is used by Lentz to describe the underlying social reality of the region when the Việt Minh worked to carve out a regional government in a section of the French-controlled Tai Federation. Local ethnic Tai cadres joined with “downstream” Việt Minh organizers to appeal for support from the Tai *muang* elite, who felt increasingly alienated by the post-World War II Tai Federation administration of Đèo Văn Long. Although French-led forces recaptured this area early in the First Indochina War (1946–54), revolutionary forces would again seize this region in October 1952. Lentz effectively describes how the military annexation of the Black River region was a very different process from the effective administration of the same region as the DRV's Northwest Zone, and he examines various challenges in socializing this borderlands territory within the larger Vietnamese geobody.

Even after revolutionary forces reestablished local governance with the help of DRV officials and traditional *muang* elite, indigenous residents still had concerns about their economic well-being, and these concerns affected the legitimacy of the new revolutionary government. As Lentz notes, the “DRV gained access to land and labor resources bound up in *muang* relations by withholding land reform, empowering a local elite to tax food, and constructing Vietnamese citizens in Tai communities. But these powerful processes generated other outcomes as well, notably producing hunger among the poor and reproducing privilege for the elite” (p. 131). Applying local corvée labor requirements equally to Tai, Hmong, and Dao communities caused unforeseen challenges by “[eroding] the labor autonomy of swidden cultivators... [and] threaten[ing] them with Tai domination” (p. 114). These social challenges in local organizing were magnified during the mobilization effort in the Điện Biên Phủ campaign. Transporting food for the army and materiel for the conflict was challenging, and Lentz argues that the logistical solution to this problem, particularly the enlistment of civilian porters (*dân công*) from Tai and non-Tai communities in the local populace, was part of the process of claiming the Black River region for the new Vietnamese nation.

As Lentz writes, when compared with the 1952 campaign, “the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign lasted three times longer, supported double the number of troops, and depended on four times as many laborers, including triple the number of locals... Increasing mass participation drove, and was driven by, centralizing bureaucratic power and elite domination” (p. 134). Lentz describes how later official accounts of the Điện Biên Phủ campaign “[privileged] Vietnamese regions as the sole supply sources—to the exclusion of Laos and China” (p. 169). Although the sources may still be unavailable, I would very much like to know more about unofficial participation in the campaign from these regions, where Tai-speaking communities would have their own motives for expanding local authority in this fluid zone between expanding nation-states.

Administration of the Black River region after 1954 offered mixed results for communities of swidden agriculturalists. The Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone, established in 1956, gave the Tai elite more power and undermined the existing social and economic practices of the region's non-Tai communities. The former jailer Lò Văn Mười become chief justice in this new administrative unit and, with his fellow Tai cadres, worked tirelessly to conform the local populace to the socialist norms of the DRV state. Condemning the cross-border “Calling for a King” (*xung vua đón vua*) movement, Lò Văn Mười clamped down on this alternative vision of national unity between the newly named “border zones” (*vùng biên giới*) and the lowland central government as part of a “broader push to securitize external borders and regulate internal forms of socio-economic difference” (p. 237). However, as Lentz notes, following the tenth anniversary celebration of the victory at Điện Biên Phủ, local harvest in the renamed Northwest Autonomous Zone only provided enough food for the celebration itself, and hunger plagued the region throughout the following summer (p. 250).

This well-researched book is the formation of a Vietnamese geobody through control of a borderlands territory and containment of its population in the revolutionary process. Anyone interested in exploring the decolonization of post-1945 Vietnam's borderlands and the development of that nation's official relations with its uplands communities, with impacts down to the present day, would benefit greatly from reading this book.