

Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam. By Christian C. Lentz

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Contested Territory: Điện Biên Phủ and the Making of Northwest Vietnam. By Christian C. Lentz

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In this impressive work, Christian Lentz explores the ways in which the emergent Vietnamese territory was produced through social relations and deployed as a strategic form of rule in northwestern Vietnam. Drawing on years of detailed fieldwork and painstaking documentary research at the underexplored National Archives of Vietnam, Lentz constructs a new narrative of the events surrounding the decisive moment in Vietnam's struggle for independence from French colonial rule: the 1954 Battle of Điện Biên Phủ.

Lentz shows how the leadership of the nascent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) constructed territory as a means of rule by developing and deploying an imagined Vietnamese state territory (or what Thongchai Winichakul [1994] memorably called a “geobody”) that did not yet exist, nor was even certain would exist. Lentz follows the threads of his argument through a sweeping chronological narrative, weaving together personal histories, official narratives, and, in fine-grained detail, documentary evidence produced by firsthand observers of the lead-up, climax, and aftermath of the cataclysmic events at Điện Biên Phủ.

He begins in the midst of the tumultuous years at the close of World War II, when European colonial hegemony in Asia had begun to crumble. The narrative takes us through the subsequent rise of nationalist, anticolonial agitation, the resurgence of the Việt Minh forces, and the subsequent consolidation of the DRV. He leads us through key events—the Northwest Campaign in 1952, the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, and its aftermath until 1960—as they unfolded across the Black River region, a region then under the semiautonomous Tai Federation (formerly, Sip Song Chau Tai, ສິບສອງເຈົ້າໄຕ), an ethnically diverse principality in present-day northwestern Vietnam. Lentz focuses our attention on the ways in which the emergent Vietnamese geobody was imagined and subsequently produced through relations of trade and taxation (of rice, salt, opium, and other items) as well as labor between upstream (Tai, Dao, Hmong, and Khmu) and downstream (Kinh) peoples, and how it was deployed as a strategy of territorial rule.

In this book, we are presented with a fresh perspective that problematizes the Vietnamese state's glorious narrative of an uninterrupted “peoples war” of national liberation founded on unquestionable solidarity and pluriethnic equality. Unlike many other treatments of this period, Lentz focuses not so much on the martial elements of the struggles, but rather on their largely unexamined subtext: the social relations of power that supported and sought to legitimize socialist restructuring of the mountainous frontier. Central to this story is the uneasy alliance between (Kinh) ideologue revolutionaries and the local Tai nobility. While the Faustian bargain that was forged with the Tai nobility by the socialist revolutionaries arguably enabled the stunning victory of the DRV in 1954, Lentz argues that, in its aftermath, it very nearly undid it. While socialist ideals of equality and liberation galvanized the rural peasantry and enlisted them in the revolutionary cause, the capitulation of the DRV to the feudal Tai nobility reproduced historic inequalities and undermined promised land reforms. Exacerbated by recurrent famine and ongoing taxation and labor conscription to feed and mobilize DRV forces, rural unrest in the years immediately following the ouster of the French grew to a groundswell of antirevolutionary agitation as Dao, Hmong, and Khmu minorities and the Tai peasantry resisted, sometimes violently, their incorporation into the Vietnamese geobody.

Lentz's work emerges from the intellectual soil of critical geographers and scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Stuart Elden, Michel Foucault, Nancy Peluso, James Scott, Thongchai Winichakul, and others, but breathes new life into this tradition in important ways. Grounding his analysis in “the everyday agrarian politics” (p 7) of peasants and the elite, he illustrates in striking clarity what terms like “territorial imaginaries” actually look like in practical and material terms. In so doing, he demonstrates why territory cannot simply be seen as a spatial container in which social and material processes play out, but it is also the product of them. Territory thus becomes not a thing but rather a loose collection of many “things”—messy, negotiated, contradictory, and contested. It is also a strategy in itself. The imagined territories of both the elite and the subaltern are trotted out to serve specific (but not unitary) political goals.

Contested Territory reminds us clearly of the mutability of the state geobody. However tempting it is to project backward in time the current boundaries of nation states onto their past, we risk running afoul of the reality that these administrative entities are historically contingent social constructs that are produced, negotiated, and malleable. They are also permeable, closely intertwined with processes at scales above and below them. Lentz demonstrates the extent to which seemingly local events surrounding the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ depended on very nonlocal material and political resources. For example, food resources from neighboring Laos and the game-changing weaponry—artillery manufactured in the United States, deployed in Korea, captured by the Chinese People's Liberation Army,

and redeployed at Điện Biên Phủ—that turned the tide of the conflict. Conversely, the battle—waged in a Tai polity that few outside the region had ever heard of—became a thunderclap that rattled the windows of Europe and America, changing the course of modern history.

Lentz's historic narrative has immediate relevance today. Governing mountainous peripheries remains a core concern in ongoing processes of state formation in mainland Southeast Asia (Peluso and Lund 2011; Dwyer et al 2016), Central Asia (Goodhand 2008; Ingalls and Mansfield 2017), and many other areas (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013). Framing these spaces as resource frontiers as well as places of poverty and insecurity provides both incentive and legitimacy for rendering them legible and obedient to state power. With globalization, expanding investment and market systems provide new tools and resources for drawing these mountainous marginal areas into the orbit of the state. At the same time, however, accelerating flows of people and resources and the narrowing space-time gap between places calls into question the significance and meaning of contemporary geobodies. This all has far-reaching implications for our understanding of sovereignty and control over processes that are increasingly regional and global in nature.

Political projects of territory-making are, of course, not limited to terrestrial spaces. Territorial constructs like those strategically deployed during Vietnam's struggle for liberation are trotted out once more today on Vietnam's seaward front. As China, Vietnam, and others seek to exert control over the maritime region contentiously referred to as either the South China Sea (by China) or the East Sea (by Vietnam)—in both cases with obvious geosymbolic import—

each invoke an imagined territorial geobody to defend their contested claims. Like the earlier Indochinese conflicts, this local territorial struggle risks spilling over into global conflict, involving not only regional powers but also the United States, Japan, and others.

For contemporary observers concerned with development and the political economy of former French Indochina, Lentz's analysis of the triggers of counterrevolutionary conflicts during the early DRV period—racially charged power inequalities and the realpolitik approach to governing rural margins that produced highly uneven risks and rewards—tells a cautionary tale. Today, the growing divide between wealthy, urban centers and rural peripheries bears a striking resemblance. If the events surrounding the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ tell us anything, it is that unrest at the peripheries seldom stays there but, all too often, finds its way to the center.

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