

In the Footprints of War: Environmental History, Militarization, and Landscape in Central Vietnam

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Footprints of War: History and the Militarized Landscape in Central Vietnam draws on extensive site research, oral histories, military records, state records and a geographic information system that includes maps, aerial photography, and satellite imagery. The primary aim of this project is to consider a longer-range historical perspective on the relationships between military conflict, land use, and social change in Vietnam. While most people may be aware of the unprecedented ecological destruction associated with American military operations in Vietnam during the 1960s, few know that many of the same areas had long experienced environmental degradation from prior wars—including deforestation from conflicts from the mid-1600s. My research in villages and towns around several former American base sites suggests that modern military occupants in the 1960s were but one highly destructive occupant in landscapes and villages that have survived many waves of prior military tenants. My book aims to recast the environmental history of military conflict in Vietnam as a long history of militarization processes that run through the volatile twentieth century and continue to shape land-use decisions today.

My aim—both with the book and visual project—is to suggest a new paradigm for understanding the environmental and social histories of military conflict and mobilization. Most research on Vietnam today begins with actions post-1965, and similar research on war in the Middle East begins post-1947 or even post-2003. By ignoring the longer history, such projects often fall short in conveying local, indigenous responses to military conflict. *Footprints* explores how underlying spatial and environmental pre-histories shaped the material and political terms that played into successive military events, especially revolutionary movements and counter-insurgency operations. It pays more attention to the influence of long-running social and environmental trends on the ground, trends often visible in the landscape. The book takes a cue from French theorist Henri Lefebvre who, writing about his native Paris, considered urban spaces like seashells built from so many accreted layers—i.e., walls, roads and ruins left by past conflict. Applying his idea of a “triadic dialectic” in *The Production of Space*, the book explores the interconnected layering of tangible and intangible artifacts from past military conflicts. Intangible legacies include land-use rights such as “military salary lands,” and tangible remains include physical features such as roads as well as buried ordnance.

The chapters of the book are organized chronologically. The introduction explores core ideas to the book such as militarization, ideas of landscape and other associated terms such as “creative destruction.” Two early history chapters examine what I call the “deep landscape,” the formation of the earliest Vietnamese settlements and early modern warfare in the region. A successive chapter examines colonial military occupation in the region and the development of modern Vietnamese resistance movements to 1954. The middle three chapters of the book examine the growth of military bases and the National Liberation Front post-1960 through the “American War” 1965–1975. The final chapter and epilogue examine post-war responses, remediation of military ruins, and re-militarization today. This layered approach is important for conveying a greater appreciation of the social and environmental transformations brought by militarization over longer durées. It presents a way for readers to consider how militaries, local revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries negotiated the landscape as a complex space of historic, political, and physical dimensions.