Interactions with a Violent Past

Vatthana Pholsena

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23999

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=852767
As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning.


The history of the Second Indochina War (1961–75) — better known as the “Vietnam War” or, in Vietnam, as the “American War” — is a subject of continuous and important scholarship. The politics, diplomacy, and military operations occupy a prominent place in these studies, covering the American and, increasingly, Vietnamese dimensions of the war. Less is known, though, about the impacts of warfare violence upon local societies and populations, including those in Laos and Cambodia, which are being felt to this very day. This significant gap is surprising given that the number of war dead — civilians and soldiers alike — in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam during the conflict runs into the millions, including 1.7 million who died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1978. Covering localities and events that took place in the three countries, the nine chapters in this volume discuss the manifold legacy of these violent times — the complex aftermath of the war as manifest in the Cambodian, Lao, and Vietnamese scarred landscapes, and their inhabitants’ everyday lives.
The Second Indochina War in Historical Perspective

From a Western perspective, the Vietnam War is often narrowed to the American military involvement in South Vietnam between 1965 and 1975 to prevent the collapse of the US-sponsored South Vietnamese government and the communist takeover of Vietnam. However, this Southeast Asian theater of the global Cold War extended beyond both North and South Vietnam, as war spilled over into Laos and Cambodia. The roots of this larger conflict date back to the end of the First Indochina War (1946–54) that marked the final days of the French rule in Southeast Asia and the subsequent independence of the royal governments of Laos and Cambodia confirmed by the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference in July 1954. The latter also fatefully confirmed the (provisional) partition of Vietnam into a communist zone (ruled by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; hereafter, DRV) in the north and a non-communist zone in the south (known as the Republic of Vietnam from its creation in 1955 until its fall in 1975). Once Vietnam had been divided at the 17th parallel by the 1954 Geneva Agreements, Laos shared borders with both North and South Vietnam, altogether 1,300 miles of a highly permeable upland frontier. The regional dimension of the Vietnam War was further entrenched by the crucial support of the Việt Minh to the Lao and Cambodian revolutionary movements, as the creation and development of guerrilla bases in the peripheral regions of Cambodia and Laos were largely due to Hanoi’s military and financial aid and political guidance since the aftermath of the Second World War (see Goscha 2004, 2010; Engelbert and Goscha 1995). The Vietnamese communists had several reasons for intensifying their efforts to build up military forces and revolutionary bases in neighboring Cambodia and Laos. First, in developing close military and political collaboration with local anti-colonial movements, especially in eastern Laos, the Việt Minh was creating a buffer zone to protect their western flank from attacks from the French troops and to enable their troops to freely intervene in Laos (hence, the invasion by the Việt Minh troops of the two Lao northeastern provinces of Houaphan and Phongsaly in December 1953). Second, the DRV considered it essential that communist movements expand their membership in Laos and Cambodia and train local cadres so they could lead the struggle side-by-side with the Vietnamese, thus carrying out a genuine Indochinese revolution (Vu 2009). At the same time, following the partition of Vietnam, the United States was determined to build a distinctly anti-communist state in Southern Vietnam (and in Laos) as part of what the US administration viewed as a Cold War struggle against communism. Postcolonial civil wars
in former French Indochinese countries therefore mirrored the global ideological confrontation, pitting on the one hand communist forces supported by the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, and conservative parties backed by the United States and their anti-communist allies in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines, on the other.

The most deadly period of the Second Indochina War began in the mid-1960s during the process of “escalation” as the United States was pouring in aid to support the southern Republic of Vietnam, a regime that appeared to be unable to help itself against an ever more effective communist movement. The insurgent National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (the communist organization in the South, referred to as the Việt Cộng by the US and the South Vietnamese government) was supplied with men and materials from North Vietnam along the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail (hereafter, HCMT), in reality a maze of interlocking paths and roads that was set up by the North Vietnamese army to circumvent the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Vietnam and which partly ran through eastern Laos. By mid-1964, the Johnson administration (1963–69) was convinced that sustained bombing attacks, directed first against the HCMT in Laos, and then against key targets in North Vietnam, might force the communists to stop supplies flowing into South Vietnam from the North, and thus gave the RVN time to stabilize politically and gradually gain control of the provinces. In March 1965, the US administration initiated Operation Rolling Thunder, its deadly campaign of air strikes against North Vietnam (March 1965–November 1968). In all, Rolling Thunder killed an estimated 52,000 North Vietnamese (Lawrence 2008: 99). A few years earlier, under the Kennedy administration (1961–63), US Air Force aircraft had launched another devastating air campaign, Operation Ranch Hand (whose motto was “Only We Can Prevent Forests”) that sprayed about 20 million gallons of herbicide over more than four million acres of South Vietnam (and also partly on the uplands of Laos) between 1962 and 1971 (Young 1991: 82). The spray, including the infamous Agent Orange, is responsible for ongoing environmental damage and human suffering in today’s Vietnam (see Chapter 7 by Susan Hammond).

In Laos, the provinces of Xieng Khouang (North-East) and Savannakhet (Central-South) bore most of the brunt of the American bombing raids. In Xieng Khouang, the Plain of Jars (where enough air power could be based to dominate the whole South China and the Mainland of Southeast Asia) turned into the central battlefield of the Lao civil war where Rightist, Neutralists, and Communists fought for the control of this strategically important region. While the Lao communist troops were
supported by North Vietnamese soldiers, the USA recruited a “secret army” among a faction of the Hmong ethnic population under the leadership of General Vang Pao, himself a Royal Lao Army officer of Hmong origins. By late 1964, North Vietnamese manpower and supply infiltration through southern Laos showed no signs of losing ground. The US Air Force launched in December of that year air strikes against fixed targets and infiltration routes throughout Laos, which soon expanded in April 1965 to a day-and-night air campaign. The US Air Force initiated a major air campaign in areas being contested by ground forces in northern and northeastern Laos, as well as along the HCMT in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands in an attempt to interdict men and material being supplied to the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. A wide variety of munitions were employed, many of which — notably, cluster bomblets — continue to present a threat until the current day (see chapters by Elaine Russell, Christina Schwenkel, and Vatthana Pholsena, this volume). From 1964 to 1973, American planes dropped 2,093,100 tons of ordnance in 580,344 bombing missions in the borderlands of Laos and Vietnam (Khamvongsa and Russell 2009: 289). To escape American bombing, the Lao communist leadership sought refuge in dozens of caves in the mountains of Houaphan province in northeastern Laos, bordering northern Vietnam. Between 1964 and 1973, a cave city emerged in Viengxay district including army quarters, warehouses, and schools — sheltering both soldiers and civilians whose livelihoods were severely affected by the daily bombing raids (see Chapter 2 by Oliver Tappe).

Meanwhile in Vietnam, it was clear by early 1965 that nothing would prevent the collapse of South Vietnam but the direct support of US combat troops. The first US combat units landed in Đà Nẵng, a major port city at the Central Coast of Vietnam, in March 1965. By the end of 1965, around 184,300 US servicemen were in South Vietnam, and reached almost half a million (approximately 475,200) at their peak in 1969 (Young, Fitzgerald, and Grunfeld 2002: 162–3). In the same year, the process of “escalation” reached its heights when those troops moved from a defensive strategy centered on key US bases to all-out “Search-and-Destroy” operations in the more remote border regions. In March 1969, the US Air Force began its secret bombardment of rural Cambodia, aimed at destroying the bases and troops of the People’s Army of Vietnam (the North Vietnamese regular army) and the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam that utilized the country’s eastern border areas as a sanctuary and a storage
base for weapons and materials to be transported into South Vietnam. As a result, upland populations living in the Lao-Cambodian-Vietnamese borderlands, who before had little contact with central political powers, were drawn into the international conflict. The war and its aftermath led to considerable socio-cultural transformations and strategies for survival (see chapters by Krisna Uk and Ian Baird).

The communists’ victory in 1975 (the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh on 17 April. Saigon fell two weeks later, and on 2 December, the founding of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was proclaimed in Vientiane) signaled the end of the Second Indochina War, but did not bring about an immediate end to extreme violence. Public disclosure of the Cambodian genocide (1975–78) and the wars that opposed Vietnam against Cambodia and China in late 1978 and early 1979 stunned the world and left socialist movements, especially those in non-Western countries, bewildered. In the interval of a few months, faith in Asian communism and its inspirational model for the anti-imperialist struggle was crushed. In addition to being largely driven by Khmer racist chauvinism, the Khmer Rouge revolution, “neither purely indigenous nor fully imported” as Ben Kiernan (2006: 201) puts it, was a “syncretism” of extensively-borrowed, yet partially followed and locally reinterpreted, foreign revolutionary doctrines. Ultimately, both foreign influences and indigenous components of Khmer Rouge ideology and practice propelled the leaders of the Democratic Kampuchea (April 1975–January 1979) toward their genocidal project which weighs heavily on Khmer collective memory until today (see Chapter 1 by Sina Emde). Under the Khmer Rouge regime, approximately 1.7 million people (one in five) died from malnutrition, overwork, diseases, or were executed by the Khmer Rouge.

Results of war and subsequent socialist revolutions have left visible traces in these countries’ human and physical landscapes. The Second and Third Indochina Wars deeply marked both peoples and places, while experiments of orthodox socialism in the aftermath of the conflicts, that is, rural collectivization and population displacement, contributed to the character of the region as a topographic and demographic palimpsest. Today’s Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian landscapes bear inscriptions of competing violent ideologies and their perilous material manifestations. From battlefields and massive bombing to reeducation camps and resettled villages, the past lingers on in the physical, often ruined, environment, but also in precarious objects such as unexploded ordnance (UXO) that are shallowly
buried in large areas of contaminated land. These landscapes are a disturbing memento of the tragedy of millions of people. As Mai Lan Gustafsson (2009: xi) observes in the Vietnamese context: “[…] with more than 5 million or 13 percent of the population killed, and with family size at that time averaging six people, it was statistically probable that every family would lose someone” (emphasis in the original). A great part of the population in Vietnam has mourned family members killed in the fighting or searched in vain for the remains of loved ones whose bodies were never recovered (see Chapter 3 by Markus Schlecker). It is to these post-conflict landscapes that we turn in this book.

War Landscapes and Lingering Violence

Rather than regarding landscapes as a mere physical reality “out there,” geographers, as well as anthropologists, sociologists and historians, have studied landscape as a political, social, and cultural process characterized by the interaction and mutual constitution of human societies and their physical environment (see, for example: Hirsch 1995; Ingold 2000; Miller 2006; Lefebvre 1974). Landscape is a contingent interplay of actuality and potentiality, not limited to a fixed image or immutable representation of an idea as once envisioned by English landscape painters and designers (Williams 1985). Instead, landscape has to be interpreted in its historical, social, and cultural context (Hirsch 1995: 23; Stewart and Strathern 2003). In a similar way, Barbara Bender (1993: 2) argues: “The way in which people — anywhere, everywhere — understand and engage with their worlds will depend upon the specific time and place and historical conditions. It will depend upon their gender, age, class, caste, and on their social and economic situation.” This approach to the analysis of landscape as contextual horizon of perception provides a great variety of possible vantage points with regard to human perceptions of their physical environment, examining landscape and humans in their manifold entanglements. The outer appearance of landscapes should not be neglected since the perception of landscapes is a process that takes aspects of aesthetics, memory and materiality into account — all on their own capable to constitute a meaningful environment with which the inhabitants correspond in their daily activities. In short, landscapes are never inert geophysics or timeless artifacts but change in interaction with the people who see and shape them, and whom in turn are affected by them.

The degree of how people perceive themselves as an integral part of the environment might vary considerably from Melanesians who consider
themselves as persons as effect of the surrounding world (Strathern 1999) over the ancient Egyptians who extended individual materiality by erecting monumental pyramids (Meskell 2004) to the intensive agriculture that transforms landscapes according to the will of the cultivating subject. What these radical different positions have in common is the constant interaction between people and environment. Landscape in particular has the potential to frame people’s sense of place, time and community; as Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern (2003: 4) point out: “A place is a socially meaningful and identifiable space to which a historical dimension is attributed. Community refers to sets of people who may identify themselves with a place or places in terms of notions of commonality, shared values or solidarity in particular contexts.” The influential French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 204) argued that group remembrance endured when they had a “double focus — a physical object, a material reality such as a statue, a monument, a place in space, and also a symbol, or something of spiritual significance, something shared by the group that adheres to and is superimposed upon this physical reality.” The dense experiential and social qualities of place and landscape therefore not only frame social memory, but they also situate and spatially constitute group remembrance. This complex process manifests itself in a particular way in post-conflict landscapes.

As a physical codification with implications for a community’s historical and cultural identity, landscape is a powerful medium and the nexus of past, present and future (see Stewart and Strathern 2003). These entanglements are most dramatic in postwar landscapes from the First World War trenches of Alsace (in northeastern France bordering Germany) to the devastated DMZ region straddling the border between Laos and Vietnam, laden with traumatic memories and present qualms (see Schofield, Johnson, and Beck 2002; Tyner 2010). The violent past manifests itself in various materializations: places “where it happened” dotted with commemorative monuments and museums endorsed with an educational mission; sites where the past haunts the present through the presence of remaining bones in the Cambodian killing fields (see Sina Emde’s chapter) or may irrupt unpredictably via the sudden explosion of a “forgotten” bomb in a rice field or at the center of a village (see Christina Schwenkel’s and Elaine Russell’s chapters). These very material appearances of a past conflict are entangled in one landscape of memory. In other words, post-conflict landscapes have the potential of (forcefully) creating a specific sense of place among the inhabitants not least due to their aggressive materiality — a sense of a landscape as imbued with malevolent agency (see Allerton 2012).
As Daniel Miller (1985: 204–5) notes, war landscapes structure perceptions, “constraining or unleashing ideas and emotions by the people who live within it.” Elaine Russell and Christina Schwenkel in this volume make clear that war debris (such as unexploded ordnance or UXO which can be regarded as index of past violent intentionality according to Gell 1998: 17) “[because of its dangerous potency] remains a contested signifier of memory — of past dangers and present uncertainties” (see Schwenkel’s chapter). Postwar landscapes and its components — such as battlefields, trenches, bunkers, or war debris — often function as metonyms of past events and histories (Saunders 2002). They can be partially erased by razing or overgrowing — or, on the opposite, set in scene and made visible. As representations of past human conflicts, they embody the contradictions of victory and defeat, heroism and tragedy. These “imperial debris,” to use Anne Stoler’s (2008) expression, are a constant reminder of the violent past for those who lived through it, triggering memories of warfare through leftover weapons’ capacity of injuring and killing.

The opposite is possible too, namely a sense of displacement resulting from the destruction of a place, thereby undermining “any secure sense of abiding place” (Casey 1998: xiii). The victims of forced migration often fill this void with imaginary landscapes in which idealized home and traumatic events intersect. Such ambiguous and often distorted mental landscapes with its inherent conflict of nostalgic and traumatic sentiments demand a special phenomenology that considers articulations and negotiations of shifting imaginaries. Ian Baird provides an account of the forced relocation of a Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic minority community, the Heuny (or Nya Heun), in southern Laos in the late 1990s as the result of the construction of a hydropower dam. The displacement caused not only physical damages (through illness and malnutrition), but also great anxiety and acute feelings of nostalgia among the displaced vis-à-vis their old land. Baird stresses that the Heuny people’s attachment to their former place of living cannot be explained solely on the basis of material conditions (access to cultivable land, water and forestry resources), but must also be tied to the spiritual force emanating from “archives of memory” of an ancestral land, conveyed through stories told and retold throughout several generations that ultimately mark a place as “homeland.” This forced relocation also contains a hidden script: very few members of the Heuny population joined the communist forces during the Indochina Wars; having been on the “wrong side” during the war, they are careful now not to be labeled as “anti-government” and therefore (reluctantly) conceded to move out of their land.
Contested Lieux de Mémoire

Pierre Nora’s multiple volumes on the *Lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984–92) mark a spatial turn in the historical sciences. His ambitious project examined French national sites of memory (including architecture, public festivals, books and monuments) as sites “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself” (Nora 1989: 7) — in other words, where memory is (re-) produced and elicited. According to Nora, we no longer live in nature-made “environments of memory” (*milieux de mémoire*), but instead create self-conscious “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*). Such sites result from the twin processes of “de-ritualization” and secularization of the world: “we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organise celebrations … because such activities no longer occur naturally” (Nora 1989: 12). Landmarks/monuments associated with historical events and linked to activities and processes of collective commemoration are perhaps the best known examples for this perspective on history and memory. As traces of the past (see Ricoeur 1990, 2004) of a given society, such sites are key tools for both historians and anthropologists.

Although Nora was criticized for his strong focus on the (French) nation-state, a questionable holism, and his strict separation between history and memory, he nonetheless inspired numerous studies on material landscapes and modern memory (see, for example: Winter 2003; François 1996; Rose 2010; Bensoussan 2004; Greene 2002). Objects of research comprise — among others — landmarks as anchors of collective memory, the politics of official commemoration via monuments, and the uncanny affects of relics and ruins on individual memory. Here memories appear as objectified or ossified in historical monuments yet maintain a fundamentally interactive and dialogical quality (Young 1993). For Nora, memory is always actual, whereas history is only a pale representation of the past (embodied by “dusty” archives). Nora emphasizes the idea of a vivid memory-nation with the *lieux de mémoire* as basic instruments of historical work — “inscriptions” as Paul Ricoeur (2004: 404) calls them. Even if Nora’s early enthusiasm of a new history of multiple voices was sidelined in his later works by a critique of state enforced *patrimonialisation*, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* remains a useful analytical tool in post-conflict societies since “the term makes it possible to reassemble the shattered national whole” (Nora 1998: 636). This assessment echoes Bruno Latour’s (1996) conception of “assemblages” as complex networks of persons and things. For example, “national” landscapes of memory — landscapes rearranged and reinterpreted in the context of nation-building projects — can be analyzed as assemblages or configurations of a network of various actors in
constant interaction, constituting and contesting each other. Yet such sites are often appropriated by the state for official commemorative politics linked to the state-staged national imaginary. Nonetheless, the interplay with local collective memory and individual subjectivities also shapes the meaning of these sites; therefore, the shifting meanings — or the historicity — of sites of memory have to be taken into account as well.

Collective memory implies the idea of a socially constructed and continually reproduced memory — an ongoing project of “reconstructive imagination” (Assmann 1998: 14) aiming at the production of meaning that is unstable and susceptible for ideological/political contention. Which aspects of the past are highlighted often depends on who appropriates a landscape of memory and to what purpose. Official grand narratives of a national past are often standardized accounts that contrast with individual memories and perceptions of certain lieux de mémoire. The appropriation of landscape as a medium of memory (and forgetting) appears in various strategies such as naming of special places, physical manipulation, construction of lieux de mémoire, and narrative backups of memory associated with certain places. This entails both the creation of meaning and selective forgetting or even repression (Olick 2008). Landscapes appear to be imbued with different layers of memory, as palimpsests that can be deciphered or selectively manipulated, for example by the state seeking to define and control historical meaning. As Oliver Tappe’s contribution demonstrates, “eventful” landscapes can become “historical” when the events and persons associated with the place are deliberately commemorated and linked to narratives of national liberation. In the case of Viengxay, the so-called “birthplace of the Lao PDR,” the combination of revolutionary commemoration and tourism development created an ambiguous dynamic that turned a few inconspicuous caves in the Lao mountains into a busy center of tourism and commemorative fervor. The fact that the leaders of the Lao revolution spent the “American War” in these caves furthermore gives them an aura of history and heroism. The works of foreign tourism experts on the other hand put more emphasis on the oral memories of the local people so as to give the place more “authenticity” mainly destined for an international audience. Thus, the agenda of this landscape of memory is not coherent; neither is Viengxay a mere stage that reflects state power. As Karen Till (2003: 290) observes, “[…] places of memory and the processes associated with their establishment, demonstrate the complex ways that nationalist imaginations, power relations, and social identities are spatially produced.”
Indeed, state narratives of a national past can also coexist with polysemic individual memories and perceptions of certain lieux de mémoire. Invoking the national memorial sites of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek located in the vicinity of Phnom Penh, Sina Emde alerts us to the emotional importance of memory that can bridge the divide between the state’s agenda to legitimize a normative historiography that these two sites serve to convey and the deeply personal memories of the remaining survivors of Tuol Sleng and of the relatives of those tortured and murdered. In particular, through the testimonies the civil parties gave during the investigation of Case 001 (concerning the tortures and mass murders perpetrated on the two sites of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek) at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) set up in 2006, the tribunal itself became a space of emotional recollections “as the testimonies depict the subjective meanings those national memorial sites hold for the few remaining survivors of Tuol Sleng and the relatives of those tortured and murdered beyond the collective sufferings exhibited and narrated by the Cambodian state,” Emde writes. Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek are places of national commemoration that aim to fuel Cambodian people’s collective memory through the sense of sharing the national history of the collective suffering of the victims during the time of the Khmer Rouge. The state cannot achieve this objective alone, however, and acts of personal remembrance, Emde argues, are as important in infusing meaning, that is, a sense of shared place, and adding further legitimacy to the sites and beyond the national narrative.

Sites of memory and their material components are not always easily “readable”; they may convey multiple interpretations and even be reconfigured. Different aspects of memorial material constitute manifold traces of the past that derive their meaningfulness from specific connections or associations with past events, persons, and places. In his chapter, Markus Schlecker shows that material carriers of memory such as the bia stones in Vietnam — commemorative stelae that inform of past achievements of meritorious individuals associated with a place — sometimes reemerge from oblivion or are created anew. While in the former case the process of deciphering leads to debates about the significance of a newly discovered stone in Thanh Hà, a rural commune in Northern Vietnam, and its relevance for the place; in the latter case, we witness the purposeful (re)construction of a site of memory, that is, war-martyr bia, the villagers’ own version of a memorial stone to commemorate exemplary persons who sacrificed their lives during the “Wars of Resistance” (Kháng Chiến) against
the French and the Americans. Among tribute policies for those who fought and died and for the survivors implemented in Vietnam during the American/Vietnam War, the most important ceremonial innovation by the regime was the creation of an official and secular memorial service for the war dead elaborated upon the public veneration of military heroes in Vietnamese history. Shaun Malarney (2001: 58) has argued that “this new ceremony represented an effort by the state to individually recognize the sacrifice of those who died in battle,” and indeed, these ceremonies and the ideas of honor, glorification and nobility of suffering and dying for a “just cause” they conveyed were “compelling” for many Vietnamese. Yet, while the war dead belonged to the pantheon of national heroes from the perspective of the Vietnamese state, the families of those who sacrificed (hi sinh) their lives also sought to incorporate them in a different community, made up of kin, both heroic and unheroic (Hue-Tam Ho-Tai 2001: 12). In a similar way, Schlecker shows that war-martyr stelae and the commemorative rituals associated with them are being presently refashioned by local population as they are now included in the ritual care of the ancestral kin group (dòng họ). Indeed, engraved on a war martyr bia were only those who were descendants of the dòng họ in the rural commune of Thanh Hà. These stelae were thus breaking down the state category of war martyrs according to blood ties and locality. The materiality of the bia is of special relevance here since it implies durability in time and a “readiness-to-hand” (Heidegger 1962) for both individual and collective memory works.

Inconspicuous, seemingly banal, material landscape can project a variety of images, representations and memories from different vantage points. In her contribution, Vatthana Pholsena studies a road. Road 9 in Savannakhet Province in southern Laos is at once a historical relic — a colonial testimony of French (failed) ambitions in Indochina — a revolutionary icon in today’s regime’s official memory — as a “strategic route” (saen yutthasat) that supported the communist infiltration into Eastern Laos and South Vietnam during the American War in Vietnam — an interdicted space, as remembered by survivors of the US Army bombing, that turned into a road “back to civilization” in times of peace, and finally, as one moves to the “post” era (after the war and beyond the socialist project), a place of unfinished histories entangled in public silence, apparent social amnesia, and private remembrance. To be sure, Road 9 is now a “modern,” paved road with hardly any trace of wartime or postwar debris; yet, the past has not been completely erased from the surface, in that one only needs to refocus the historical lens to glimpse “what is dominant but hard
to see” (Stoler 2008: 211), that is, the dense historical and political qualities of this landscape and their continual interference into the individuals’ subjectivities. What may appear as an unremarkable physical environment to outside observers has retained a still palpable evocation of violence and rift in local residents’ perceptions of their past and their present. In a sense, the landscape of Road 9 forms a milieu de mémoire, rather than a lieu de mémoire, that is, a “natural” environment that is a social space imbued with memory-work conveying differing interpretations of the recent past.

Ruination and Transformation

Yael Navaro-Yashin’s discussion of the concept of ruination provides another vantage point for the reading of post-conflict landscapes. Ruination refers to “material remains or artifacts of destruction and violation” as well as “subjectivities and residual affects that linger, like a hangover, in the aftermath of war or violence” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 5). It includes abject material that ought to be instinctively pushed away, yet at the same time belongs to the physical environment that is hard to avoid (for instance, landmines in flooded Cambodian rice fields). Referring to Latour’s engagement with networks of subjects and objects, Navaro-Yashin calls for a relational analysis of ruined, melancholic landscapes; she writes: “An environment of ruins discharges an affect of melancholy. At the same time, those who inhabit this space of ruins feel melancholic: they put the ruins into discourse, symbolize them, interpret them, politicize them, understand them, project their subjective conflicts onto them, remember them, try to forget them, historicize them, and so on” (ibid.: 14–15; see also Gordillo 2011; Schramm 2011). Landscapes ruined by war — or ruined in the minds of dispossessed people as in Baird’s case study — produce strong effects that violently bring back tragic events of the past. The Heuyn villagers, in Baird’s chapter, continue expressing nostalgic reminiscences of their former lives in their old village settlements (which have been dismantled and are now eaten away by termites). Yet, despite the much deteriorated living conditions, some villagers have gone back, even building shacks in their former village territories and as such enacting small acts of defiance in the face of the government’s resettlement plans by reentering a zone of abandonment. Most crucially, as Ann Stoler (2008: 194) reminds us, the term “ruin” serves both as a noun and as a verb; “to ruin” — or “ruination” — is an active, corrosive process “that weighs on the future and shapes the present.” Some ruins are neither residues nor relics or (on the opposite) enchanted places, but constitute tenacious traces of a violent past that have
shattered people and scarred places. The deformed “Agent Orange Victims,” in Susan Hammond’s chapter, as ruined bodies, painfully emblematize the violent side of escalating political and ideological struggles of the Cold War and constitute uncanny mementoes of the lasting effects of modern war technology or, to borrow Stoler’s (2008: 203) words, “ecologies of remains.” Yet, these Agent Orange victims — or “One Significant Ghost” as an American official has labeled them, perhaps to emphasize their haunting, and yet elusive, presence (see Fox 2007) — would have been left outside the public view — by the Vietnamese government itself annoyed by, in their view, an embarrassing war legacy — disregarded by US officials as “Vietnamese government’s propaganda” or as Cold War leftovers, had it not been for Vietnamese grassroots efforts, relayed by international activists’ awareness and advocacy campaigns, and Vietnamese associations’ lawsuits against the chemical companies that manufactured the components of the dioxin known as “Agent Orange.” In short, the Agent Orange-affected individuals and Agent Orange-infested landscape in Vietnam remain a contested political ground; they stubbornly continue making claims on the present and the future.

The ambivalences of ruination — in a sense of a process “that ‘bring ruin upon,’ exerting material and social force in the present” (Stoler 2004: 195) — are exemplified by Schwenkel’s discussion of demining and UXO clearance practices in the former DMZ in Quảng Trị Province in central Vietnam. On the one hand, war debris radiates a certain melancholic aura of past destruction, while constituting a lethal threat in the present. On the other hand, because of the impossible task to clear vast areas of land and completely eliminate the risk in an individual’s lifetime, hazardous landscapes have become an integral part of their inhabitants’ everyday life, and even offer the possibility of economic recovery through the (highly risky but lucrative) informal and transnational trade in war scrap metal carried out by some villagers — who thus constitute a risk society with different modes of perceiving and managing a dangerous environment (Douglas 1992). War remnants thus lie at the nexus between a violent past, potentially prosperous futures, and an uncertain present. Schwenkel shows that the unpredictable nature of explosive remnants of war in this region — that make or destroy landscapes and livelihoods — can be mitigated or, at least, negotiated through risk management and reduction practices. But “cultures of risk” (notions of risk as historically and socially contingent) significantly differ between on the one hand professional, foreign or foreign-trained Vietnamese deminers, and on the other, scrap metal collectors, also commonly referred as “hobby deminers.” The use of the term “hobby”
clearly denotes the perceived lack of proper training, if not absence of awareness of the dangers inherent to this activity, among local collectors. In their daily search for wartime scrap metal, the latter confront risk, instead of avoiding it. Their risk-taking attitude generates opprobrium in the community because they “appear to violate many of the shared values and notions of risk.” Though they may suffer from social stigma, the collectors benefit from risk through their (illegal) trading of UXO in the global market economy; hence, effectively converting risk into a commodity. Yet, adding another twist to an already complex landscape, Schwenkel points out that war debris that are commercialized (scrap metal-cum-war relics) engender much suspicion among western tourists, who consider them as “polluted” due to their perceived association with profit-making calculations and reckless behaviors. Ruins — as abject material — are therefore not just found; they can also be imagined.

It is this possibility of transforming the meaning of war debris that Krisna Uk tackles in her chapter. By drawing on the Jorai experience of the US bombing in Ratanakiri Province in northeast Cambodia, she demonstrates how the ethnic minority villagers’ encounter with war-associated objects is reenacted through the reproduction, representation and display of weapon effigies. In a post-conflict context in which people are trying to interpret violence, destruction and defeat as part of their survival strategies, symbolic and material (tactile) appropriation of war-associated objects (such as carving a bombing plane in wood or painting war-inspired themes, like hand grenades, in the crafting and decoration of funerary objects, for instance) can provide a means to control one’s traumatic experience and have a powerful therapeutic potential. Uk argues that the meanings conveyed by a tangible object can be subject to new interpretations and positive inversion by war-survivors (especially those endowed with craftsman skills) and their families. Jorai villagers’ coping ability is based not only on physical resilience, but also a creative psychological process in which the crafting of warfare objects enables people to harness the objects’ intrinsic power for positive purposes, thus turning them into signs of life. Through the acts of making, re-symbolizing, incorporation and display, war-inspired objects have been used for both ritual and everyday purposes so as to become meaningful and aesthetic features of the local landscape. In spite of years of protracted wars, local resourcefulness, not least in the context of the burgeoning tourist industry in Ratanakiri, shows the extent to which the resilience and inventiveness of some post-conflict communities can stretch so as to cope with a physically and spiritually traumatized landscape.
Three decades after the end of the American/Vietnam War and the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime, the chapters show that landscapes and peoples in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam remain scarred physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Yet, they also uncover instances of (partial) recovery and healing. In recent years, a few ethnic Heuny households have started small coffee plantations in their old homelands where soil is more fertile than in their resettlement areas. NGOs and governmental institutions have begun to engage with scrap metal collectors in Quảng Trị Province in new programs that recognize and make use of their “local” knowledge for the better of society. From 1996 to 2010, some 26,000 hectares of land were cleared of UXO in Laos — though this area represents less than one percent of all land thought to be contaminated with UXO (about eight million hectares). In truth, over the last decade, market forces have played a major role in transforming rural landscapes in these countries. Land concessions (long-term leases of state land to investors) have become a serious and complex issue in Laos and Cambodia. The most widespread, and controversial, aspect of land concessions concerns the lease of vast areas of cultivable land to foreign investors destined to the plantation and exportation of commercial crops (rice, rubber, cassava, etc.). Likewise, the landscape of Quảng Trị Province is being renewed under the impacts of large-scale projects that have involved the construction of new roads, forests, buildings and markets, as well as the development of new plantations. Post-war landscapes overgrown with vegetation or returned to cultivation sometimes “have a prewar innocence about them” (Tatum 1996: 643) evoking deceptive images of a return to normality. But this volume strives to unfold a more complicated story than the all-encompassing narrative of reconstruction and economic prosperity; the reading of post-conflict landscapes requires transcending images and discourses of seemingly unstoppable change lest we forget the enduring effects of warfare violence on human societies and environments.

Notes

1. See the emphasis for a “Vietnamization” of scholarship on the Vietnam War in Miller and Tuong Vu (2009).

2. Scholars of China — Neil J. Diamant, Diana Lary, Stephen MacKinnon, Ezra Vogel, Edward McCord, and others — have begun to study in socio-cultural ways the impact of warfare on 20th-century China (Lary and MacKinnon 2001; Lary 2010). The Vietnam War has its own appalling list of massacres, although fewer studies probing the socio-cultural impacts of these mass
killings have been produced. There are notable exceptions, however, such as Heonik Kwon’s thoughtful book (2008) on remembrance and commemorative rituals performed by survivors and descendants of the civilian victims of the Mỹ Lai and Hà Mỹ massacres. See also Fred Branfman’s (2010 [1972]) classic documentation of the violent legacy of the US bombing campaigns in Laos, James Tyner’s (2010) insightful account of modern military legacies, and Andreas Margara’s (2012) recent study of Vietnamese sites of war memory.

3. The League for the Independence of Vietnam (Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng minh hội or Việt Minh), the communist-led patriotic organization, was founded in May 1941.

4. A special group called Military Transportation Group 559 was set up in May 1959 to construct the first North-South Road and to organize the logistics (weapons and supplies) to the South, specifically to Inter-Zone V. In the same month, a North Vietnamese battalion (the 70th) was formed; its task was to transport weapons, ammunition, mail and supplies to South Vietnam through southeastern Laos, as well as to guide the infiltration groups and to help the sick and injured cadres returning to the North (Guan 2002: 35). According to The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975, “Group 559 transported a total of 165,600 weapons [‘artillery pieces, mortars, and anti-aircraft machine guns’] to the battlefields in the South during the 1961–63 period” (Military History Institute of Vietnam, 2002: 115).

5. The CIA decided in early 1960s to take the Hmong people over and use them as the nucleus for the Laotian Special Forces, named after the “Secret Army” or the “Armée clandestine” since the Americans became convinced that the Royal Lao Army would never be an efficient and reliable instrument despite the huge sums of dollars spent on it. In return for support of Hmong aspirations for autonomy, the Americans were able to use the Hmong to strike against the Việt Minh and the Pathet Lao around the Plain of Jars and Ho Chi Minh Trail (Warner 1996; Evans 2002).

6. A recent survey by the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) for the UXO/ Mine Action sector in Laos reveals that more than 50,000 people were hurt or killed by UXO (unexploded ordnances) between 1964 and 2008 (Vientiane Times, 6 Feb. 2010).


8. On Christmas Day 1978, 12 divisions of the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia following mounting Khmer Rouge attacks along the Vietnamese border provinces since 1976. By mid-1979, the Vietnamese troops controlled the main populated areas of the country; the Khmer Rouge controlled areas
in the mountains, sparsely uninhabited, of southwest Cambodia and along the Thai border. But although having lost two-thirds of its troops, the Khmer Rouge remained a functioning military force and the Democratic Kampuchea leadership was intact on the Thai border. Vietnam’s military intervention of Cambodia undermined China’s credibility and prestige (China was the Democratic Kampuchea’s main ally). The Chinese “lesson” administered to Vietnam came in the form of a brief “punitive” military invasion which lasted less than a month, between 17 Feb. and 5 Mar. 1979. The “lesson” was rather inconclusive, though, for the Chinese troops’ advance made little progress. Nonetheless, the conflicts with the Democratic Kampuchea and China isolated Vietnam — and Laos, its “special” ally — on the international scene.


10. See Henig (2012) for a related case study from postwar Bosnia.