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Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954–1965 by J.P. Harris.

Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2016. Pp. xi, 538. ISBN 978-0-7006-2283-2.

Review by Andrew J. Gawthorpe, Leiden University (a.j.gawthorpe@hum.leidenuniv.nl).

In *Vietnam's High Ground*, military historian J.P. Harris (Royal Military Acad. Sandhurst) has written what is now the standard text on operations in the Central Highlands region of South Vietnam in the first half of the Second Indochina War. His narrative stretches from the Geneva Accords (1954) through the battle at Landing Zone (LZ) Albany (Nov. 1965), the first major engagement between US forces and the North Vietnamese Army in the conflict. He delivers a vastly detailed, erudite analysis of the fighting there mostly from the perspective of the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies.

Harris argues that the Central Highlands were strategically vital, given their location athwart a major part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail logistical network, where both sides sought decisive battles in order to break the stalemate in the lowlands. This situation has been underemphasized in other histories for two reasons. First, the people of the Central Highlands (called Montagnards in English) were not ethnically Vietnamese. Second, the complexities of the war and the proclivities of mainstream historians have led to a greater focus on the broader political and strategic dynamics of the conflict than on its strictly military aspects.

The author stresses that the presence of the Montagnards in the Central Highlands theater posed particular problems for the South Vietnamese, who wanted to draw them into an essentially *Vietnamese* civil war, with little thought given by either party to the Montagnards' own "aspirations or ... ultimate fate" (23). Harris contends that conventional wisdom about, for example, the cowardice and incompetence of the South Vietnamese armed forces and the inevitability of Communist victory¹ breaks down when we zoom in on the ebb and flow of the conflict in the Central Highlands, where by late 1965 it would, he writes, have taken "a reckless pundit to pick a winner at this stage" (450).

A major strength of the book is its encyclopedic coverage of US military history in the Central Highlands based on the relevant archives. Harris dutifully compares sources, exposes inconsistencies, and acknowledges when hard data is insufficient to resolve a particular problem. He also duly alerts his audience when he is resorting to supposition or "reading between the lines" (129) of documents. Readers from green graduate students to grizzled veterans of historiographical warfare over the conflict will learn much from Harris's volume.

Another great virtue of the book is its vivid evocation of the fighting in the Central Highlands. We read of Communist assaults on bases defended by US and South Vietnamese Special Forces and members of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, a Montagnard militia. We learn that an attack on the camp of Polei Krong in July 1964 was aided from inside the wire by, among others, the camp commander's driver, a food contractor, and a South Vietnamese company executive officer,

1. Harris follows the arguments in Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006), concerning the pre-1965 strength of the South Vietnamese armed forces vis-à-vis the Communists.

all of them insurgent infiltrators. “Total disaster” was averted only by an artillery battery relocated into the camp due to its own perilous security situation (197–204). Such vignettes illustrate how hard it was to maintain static outposts without reliable intelligence, good relations with the Montagnards, and close cooperation between the US forces and their South Vietnamese allies. Yet, as Harris demonstrates, the poor state of Communist forces in the area led a stalemate rather than a decisive North Vietnamese victory.

Harris also provides a lucid and convincing account of the Pleiku campaign of late 1965, immortalized in the Hollywood film *We Were Soldiers*.² He unsparingly criticizes the 1st Cavalry Division and Gen. Dennis Kinnard, the pioneer of the air mobility concept. In particular, the 1st Cavalry had been allowed to become so overstretched early in the campaign that it could not seize the initiative after its victory at LZ X-Ray. In the film, Lt. Gen. Hal Moore leads a bayonet charge into the nearby Communist base; in reality, his forces limped away and fell into the debacle at LZ Albany (433).

The PAVN’s [People’s Army of Vietnam, North Vietnamese forces] combination of ferocity with high levels of infantry skills shook the Americans. The PAVN, by contrast, was unimpressed with American infantry skills, which seemed not significantly greater than those of the South Vietnamese.... After being shaken by the ferocity of the North Vietnamese assaults on X-Ray, the Americans exhibited the same sort of cautious, somewhat passive behavior for which they had criticized the South Vietnamese.... They mounted no riposte when PAVN attacks ceased, undertaking no storm of the Chu Pong massif. (447–48)

Though a fine work of military history, the book is less compelling on the politics of operations in the Central Highlands, the Communist movement, and the South Vietnamese situation more generally. Tellingly, important new literature³ on the Diem regime is not to be found in Harris’s bibliography. Further, the experiences and motives of both the Montagnards and the Communists get very short shrift or are conveyed only from the viewpoint of Americans, few, if any, of whom possessed the linguistic skills needed to communicate with them.

For instance, we hear about civic action programs to provide healthcare and sanitation in the communities of the Rhade, an Austronesian ethnic group in South Vietnam. The Rhade’s enthusiasm for these measures is attested only by the Americans who implemented them. Since they included fines for not using newly-installed latrines (87), we can well imagine that the group’s reaction to the arrival of white men who took an inordinate interest in where they defecated may have been more complex. But such subtleties escape us when we must rely solely on American sources.

An even more serious issue is understanding the attitude of the Montagnards toward the Communist movement. Harris tells us that some Montagnards, like Y-Bih, actively supported it, but does not specify their goals or motivating experiences (160). The highlanders may well have preferred the Communists to the South Vietnamese and American forces that bombed and strafed

2. Dir. Randall Wallace, 2002.

3. E.g., Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2013); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2013); Geoffrey C. Stewart, “Hearts, Minds and Cong Dan Vu: The Special Commissariat for Civic Action and Nation-Building in Ngo Dinh Diem’s Vietnam, 1955–1957,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6.3 (2011) 44–100; Jessica Chapman, “Staging Democracy: South Vietnam’s 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai,” *Diplomatic History* 30 (2006) 671–703; Matthew Masur, “Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam’s Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954–1960,” *Diplomatic History* 33 (2009) 293–313.

their villages, burned their crops, slaughtered their livestock, forcibly disarmed them, and perpetuated the corrupt government that ruthlessly oppressed them. Yet Harris mostly ascribes their preference for the Communists to coercion or brainwashing, even comparing a Communist youth unit to the Hitler Youth (309) and stating that Communist cadres “liquidat[ed] any form of collaboration with the enemy or resistance to the Party’s will” (310). The Party’s treatment of the civilian population—even if sometimes coercive—was rather more sophisticated and flexible than this.

These reservations aside, *Vietnam’s High Ground* is an excellent study of the often glossed over details of the struggle for South Vietnam’s Central Highlands in the early part of the war, at least from the American viewpoint. Those curious about the wider context of that struggle will need to consult recent scholarship on the South Vietnamese regime and the Communist movement, which casts doubt on the claim that it would have been “reckless” to predict American defeat in 1965.