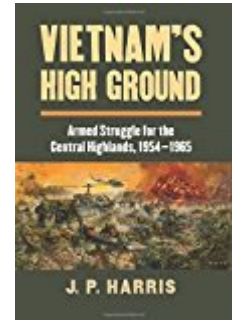


J. P. Harris. *Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954-1965.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. Illustrations, maps. 552 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2283-2.



Reviewed by Christopher N. Blaker

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The Indochina Wars—a series of regional, national, and international conflicts fought in Southeast Asia during the Cold War—were among the bloodiest and most controversial wars waged during the second half of the twentieth century. While the First and Second Indochina Wars have been dissected by historians for decades, an unparalleled degree of complexity that characterizes those wars continues to be uncovered to this day. J. P. Harris's *Vietnam's High Ground: Armed Struggle for the Central Highlands, 1954-1965* contributes a great deal to the history of the Indochina Wars. It highlights the wars' effects on a region of Vietnam that is rarely mentioned in many historical sources—the Central Highlands, which were among the most important areas in all of Vietnam during the wars. After briefly touching on the early history of Vietnam, relationships between Vietnamese and Highlander ethnic groups, French and Japanese conquests of Vietnam, and the First Indochina War (1946-54), Harris focuses the rest of his book on the early period

of the Second Indochina War between 1954 and 1965.

The author is careful to emphasize the ethnic differences between Vietnamese and indigenous Highlander populations and explains how those differences were accentuated during the period of 1954-65. Despite both the North and South Vietnamese governments maintaining a national desire for independence, neither was prepared to offer the Central Highlands any kind regional autonomy. Contrarily, both sides ravaged the landscape through countless battles and exploited the region's indigenous people for their own gain. North Vietnam brought the war to the Central Highlands by forming the Ho Chi Minh Trail alongside the region and luring South Vietnamese military units to the Highlands to trigger decisive, destructive battles. South Vietnam's Diem Regime was just as invasive, forcing indigenous Highlanders into the war through involvement with South Vietnam's Civilian Irregular Defense Group, Strategic Hamlet Program, and army.

Harris focuses specifically on the year 1965 in the last sections of his book. He offers detailed accounts of the Siege of Plei Me and Battle of Ia Drang, which were the first major clashes between the armed forces of North Vietnam and the United States. Events of 1965 ultimately marked the Vietnam War's transition from an insurgency/counterinsurgency war to a far more conventional conflict, which is how it remained until the war's end nearly a decade later.

Research materials from the period of 1954-65 reveal a great deal of previously undiscovered history of the Vietnam War. During that period, the war was conducted largely by special forces and guerilla units of all factions, which resulted in few after-action accounts or official military reports being compiled and archived. For that reason, much of the detailed history of the Vietnam War before 1965 remains a mystery.

However, historians today have access to more and better sources than existed in years past. Harris makes good use of both primary and secondary sources on the war and takes advantage of having access to materials originating in the United States, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam, and with insurgent groups, such as the Viet Cong. He is thus able to offer a balanced account of the many political and military developments occurring during the war and remains objective throughout his work.

Full-page maps of Vietnam and especially the Central Highlands help ground readers in the country's geography. Detailed graphics of military operations augment the author's descriptions of battle. High-resolution photographs of indigenous peoples at home in the Highlands; Vietnamese citizens and military personnel during the early war; and well-known U.S. Army personalities, such as General William Westmoreland, Major General Harry Kinnard, and Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, illustrate scenes painted by the author's prose. Finally, a useful chart in the book's introduction indicates that despite being in the

minority throughout the country, ethnic Highlanders were not contained only to the Central Highlands but lived in most northern provinces of South Vietnam.

Military history enthusiasts and scholars of the Vietnam War will appreciate the historical findings presented in Harris's work. The author offers a well-researched and well-organized testimony to the war's impact on Vietnam's Central Highlands, a region that received little attention during the war and perhaps receives even less in the present. While Harris views the war through a wide, anthological lens and presents a great deal of information pertaining to the conflict, his major argument—that the Central Highlands both significantly influenced and were greatly influenced by the Indochina Wars—remains at the forefront of his work. Ultimately, *Vietnam's High Ground* succeeds in broadening the value of international understanding of the Vietnam War.

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