National Networks, War Zones and Layered Sovereignty:
Village Landscapes as a Lens on the First Indochina War

David Biggs
Associate Professor in History and Public Policy, University of California at Riverside

Detail from a 1943 U.S. Army Air Force air photo showing the hills (lower left) and Highway One at Giạ Lê Village about 11km southeast of Huế, Vietnam.

The narrow strip of villages along Highway One near Huế provides a rich window into the political and military struggles of the Indochina War. This narrow transition zone where central Vietnam's foothills meet a strip of coastal plains evolved into one of the most important political fronts of the war. On the upland side, the Việt Minh expanded "liberated zones" (khu giải phóng) and smaller strategic zones (khu chiến thuật) at critical gateways to the coast. On the coastal side, French authorities enlarged bases from 1947 and a fledgling Vietnamese administration in Huế operated a nascent border force, the Việt Bình Đoàn along the violent lines where Việt Minh and French zones met. This essay considers how combatants and political actors engaged the built, natural and historic landscapes of these villages in their struggles.

David Biggs is an Associate Professor in History and Public Policy at the University of California at Riverside. His first book, Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta, considers legacies of colonialism and Cold War-era nation-building in the Mekong Delta region. His current research examines long-term social and environmental histories of military conflict and post-conflict recovery in central Vietnam.