The most famous leader of the Black Flags was Liu Yongfu. Refugees, Vietnamese peasants, and highland aborigines became bandit armies. Poor Chinese categories of bandit and official became quite flexible. Under such conditions the results were mixed. Borderland areas nominally outside the reach of the state. The Black Flags and Yellow Flags took advantage of the fighting and violence in the area. They were, for the most part, large permanent bandit armies referred to as the Black Flags and Yellow Flags who operated in the highlands on the nebulous Sino-Vietnamese borderland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were ‘imperial’ because they were frequently sanctioned first by the royal Vietnamese or Chinese governments and later by the French colonial government, which in all cases attempted to tame and use the bandits for carrying out their own expansionist agendas. The Vietnamese, Chinese, and French governments bestowed official titles and ranks on bandit leaders in efforts to transform their unruly bands into disciplined armies to fight their enemies and control borderland areas nominally outside the reach of the state. The Black Flags and Yellow Flags, in fact, were bitter enemies and often parted with one another. There was constant fighting in the highlands between rival bandit gangs and state armies. Black Flags and Yellow Flags, in fact, were bitter enemies and often parted with one another. There was constant fighting in the highlands between rival bandit gangs and state armies. Both the Black Flags and Yellow Flags took advantage of state weaknesses in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. These bandit armies were a motley throng of poor Chinese refugees, Vietnamese peasants, and highland aborigine groups, but their leaders were almost always Chinese. The most famous leader of the Black Flags was Liu Yongfu who hailed from south China’s Qzhou area in what is now Guangxi province. A charismatic figure and skilful manipulator Liu worked his way up the ranks from common bandit to high ranking official in both the governments of China and Vietnam. Imperial bandits were predatory entrepreneurs of violence, who showed no loyalty to any one party but rather sold their military skills to the highest bidder. In this way, Davis explains, bandits and officials assured the continuance of a ‘culture of violence’ in the borderlands for nearly a century. Imperial bandits were predatory entrepreneurs of violence, who showed no loyalty to any one party but rather sold their military skills to the highest bidder. In this way, Davis explains, bandits and officials assured the continuance of a ‘culture of violence’ in the borderlands for nearly a century. The seemingly endless cycle of imperial bandits continued for several more decades. In weaving his story Davis skillfully combines Vietnamese, Chinese, and French documentary evidence with the oral traditions of highland aborigines about the Black Flags and Yellow Flags and their conflicts and relationships with Vietnamese, Chinese, and French governments. As the author concludes, we cannot fully understand the interconnected histories of Vietnam, China, and France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries without recognizing the important roles that imperial bandits played in making that history. Imperial bandits are an important, well-argued book that should be essential reading for scholars and students interested in histories of modern Vietnam, China, and Western imperialism.

Unresolved Disputes in Southeast Asia

Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia is an edited volume containing 12 chapters including introduction and conclusion. Broadly speaking, this book recounts and analyses three intra-regional and extra-regional land and maritime border conflicts involving Southeast Asia, namely Preah Vihear spat between Thailand and Cambodia, Koh Tral island dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia and row over South China Sea islands, atolls and islets between China and multiple members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**Reviewed title:**
Alfred Gerstl & Maria Strasakova (eds.) 2016.
Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia
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ISBN 9789004312180

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Bradley Camp Davis. 2017.
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The Bengali famine of 1943 remains a relatively unexplored topic of the modern Indian history. Despite the insightful and thought-provoking works on the Bengal famine by Amartya Sen (Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement & Deprivation, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Paul Greenough (Prosperity & Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), both of which were incidentally published in the early eighties, the famine has not been understood in its totality. The teleological nationalistic history writing of India has exclusively focused, as Janam Mukherjee rightly notes, on the nationalist struggle, negotiations for a transfer of power, the manoeuvring of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and/or the rise of communal rancor (p.2). Mukherjee in this work provides a disturbing, yet riveting account of the Bengal famine of 1943, which was, as he aptly pointed out, not limited to the year 1943.

Review: Shubhneet Kaushik, Jawaharlal Nehru University

HE DECLARES IN THE INTRODUCTION of the book that his objective is to demonstrate the ‘deep and abiding impacts that both war and famine had on the course of events in India on the verge of independence’. And to a large extent, he succeeded in fulfilling his objective. He gave us a detailed picture of the politico-economic and socio-psychological conditions which prevailed before and after the Bengal famine of 1943. While analysing the historical events that led to the famine, and understanding the socio-political milieu of the late colonial Bengal, Mukherjee also explores the structures of power and the Bengal famine of 1943 in a continuum, where the Bengal famine was also the direct consequence of the ‘denial policy’ of the British government. It essentially means, to confiscate all surplus stocks of rice in the vulnerable coastal districts of Bengal, so that an invading Japanese army could not feed its troops with locally confiscated stocks. And to worsen the situation further, more than 40,000 boats have been destroyed fearing the Japanese invasion, thus ruining the essential water transport system of Bengal. And the ongoing war, hoarding of the middle class, and the callous attitude of the Indian society towards the problem of famine further made the situation very grim.

During the period of the famine and the war, some powerful capitalists made fortunes and even influenced the negotiations for independence. Though the policies of the colonial state were responsible for the making of the Bengal famine, the nationalist leadership was also guilty. Although it is true that most of the Congress leaders were behind bars during 1942-1944, when finally out of prison, rather than tackling the issue of the Bengal famine in careful and sensitive manner, the nationalist leadership was quite busy negotiating the transfer of power, with the colonial rule. He also draws our attention towards the fact that the leaders of both the Congress and the Muslim League had close socio-economic and political relationship with the industrialist class of Calcutta, which further led them to overlook the problem of the Bengal famine. Mukherjee rightly noted that as the end days of the Empire was also in sight, ‘the new leadership circled around the pie of independence, failing even to notice that... the population in Bengal were beginning to starve’ (p. 252). In other words, as the signposts of exponential expression of the agrarian movement (which was led by the sharecroppers) by the Indian state, also shows clearly that which class had the sympathy of nationalist leaders throughout the all the while.

The Bengal famine was also the direct consequence of the ‘denial policy’ of the British government. It essentially means, to confiscate all surplus stocks of rice in the vulnerable coastal districts of Bengal, so that an invading Japanese army could not feed its troops with locally confiscated stocks. And to worsen the situation further, more than 40,000 boats have been destroyed fearing the Japanese invasion, thus ruining the essential water transport system of Bengal. And the ongoing war, hoarding of the middle class, and the callous attitude of the Indian society towards the problem of famine further made the situation very grim.

The advantages of reading this book are manifold. First, it offers a wide variety of information both on the famine and the end of Empire and the End of Empire, Hurst & Company, ISBN 9781849044318, Janam Mukherjee. 2015.


ASEAN’s responses to it, perceptions and behaviour of very few individual countries like Vietnam, Philippines and Cambodia to the problem and finally, offer some solution to the problem which include prospects for joint development programmes. Scattered over various chapters, while reading the book, a reader will discover the past and present and understand the implications of the South China Sea disputes. The narrative offered by Josef Falko Loher clarifies; Chinese government practises a synchronised strategy to enhance its power in the region on the one hand and on the other hand, tries to keep the extra-regional powers at bay. Simultaneously, in an order to ensure dominance over the region, China tries to divide the ASEAN members on the South China Sea issue and economically weak countries like Cambodia serve the interests of the giant neighbour in doing so. The territorial disputes involving Cambodia on the one hand and other ASEAN members on the other hand further instigate Phnom Penh to accept China’s regional actions, even at the cost of a disinterested ASEAN. Alicia Kizkova and Alfred Gerstl pointed out that ASEAN follows the path of multilateral diplomacy and engaging China with the regional institutionalism initiatives to avoid further escalations and mire them down to each other. Truong Minh Vu and Jorg Tiele in an interview with Vietnam (and to some extent, Philippines’) responses to the South China Sea crisis through multidimensional ways including making friends in the region (including Japan and India), taking the issue to the international forum (such as Permanent Court of Arbitration), provoking regional mandate against China domestically and using strategic restraint by encouraging joint development initiatives.

This book offers few new arguments. First, besides China, United States is also responsible for the existing divisions within ASEAN as it often indulges itself in the great power rivalries in the region leaving little options for the smaller Southeast Asian countries to be either with the United States or with China. The role of the United States in the great power game in the region however could have been explained in a more comprehensive way. Instead, in their co-authored chapter on Phan Hiep, Richard Turcsanyi and Zdenek Kiz mentioned that China has been competing against China. While this logic sounds stimulating and optimistic, the author needs to put more efforts to clarify the reasons behind this particular thinking. Third, Padma Layathan in his chapter, noted that the South China Sea disputes have almost become an anarchical situation, thanks to the role played by the great powers, giving more value to the chapter, the author could have studied the role of the small powers in that anarchy. One striking limitation of this book is the lack of discussions on China’s role as the main disputant in such economic contests. One wonders if it is playing a pivotal role in dividing ASEAN on the maritime disputes involving China.

However, overall, Unresolved Border, Land and Maritime Disputes in Southeast Asia is most welcome new addition to the existing literature on the political history of Southeast Asia, South China Sea issue and the history of the islander conflicts in the Asia-Pacific. This would be definitely helpful for the students, scholars and experts on the region as it deals with Southeast Asia in a lucid manner which is the centre of contemporary world affairs.