

Vietnamese Archives and the Long-Term Consequences of War: An Interim Research Protocol on the Need for Problem-Oriented Information Systems

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Abstract

Two articles by Vietnamese colleagues and their presentations at the Prague conference on war, soil and freshwater systems provide the starting point for this methodological response. The articles introduce records at National Archives Centers II and III relevant to wartime chemical use and its consequences. Their publication opens a further question: how should these materials enter an investigation connecting historical events, environmental processes and human outcomes? This interim protocol reconstructs the development of the author's position through questions, critical examinations and current decisions. It argues that explaining consequences for people requires investigation beyond people, because exposure is produced through relations among sources, environmental media, organisms and human activities. Archival categories record particular human and institutional perspectives on these relations; they do not delimit the empirical process. The Scientific Recognition Architecture and the theory of military ecotones provide the basis for proposing a problem-oriented research information system. A provisional concept, the cognitive samurai complex, identifies the researcher's willingness to expose the premises of inquiry to revision as a limit on system use. AI can help reformulate questions, but cannot ensure that researchers permit the resulting questions to be investigated. The immediate proposal is a small, traceable investigation linking Vietnamese source passages, translations, historical places, claims and unresolved relationships. The article records an intermediate position and opens a longer program of work. It reports neither a completed information system nor new findings on contamination or disease.

Keywords

Vietnamese archives, consequences of war, military ecotones, Scientific Recognition Architecture, research information systems, historical geolocation, cognitive samurai complex, AI-assisted research

Key Points

- The two Vietnamese archival studies and the conference presentations initiate the inquiry developed here.
- Understanding consequences for people requires reconstruction of relevant environmental relationships beyond people.
- Archival categories and research questions must remain distinguishable from the object being investigated.
- A research information system can expose assumptions, but its use remains limited by the researcher's willingness to examine them.
- The present article records an intermediate methodological position for further archival and environmental work.

1 The starting point and the purpose of this response

Question

What should follow the identification and publication of Vietnamese archival materials on wartime chemical use and its consequences?

Documentary starting point

Cu Thi Dung and Vu Dinh Phong introduce records of Republic of Vietnam government agencies at National Archives Center II. The materials concern chemical defoliants, agricultural damage, environmental and health concerns, compensation and scientific exchange (1). Vu Thi Phung, Vu Dinh Phong and Nguyen Van Ngoc identify wartime and postwar records at National Archives Center III, including material on investigation, research and measures addressing the consequences of chemical warfare (2).

These publications, together with the Vietnamese colleagues' presentations at the Prague conference, October 15–17, 2026, make a concrete continuation possible. The present text is my response to that opportunity. The two articles identify relevant sources and explain conditions of their use. I ask how those sources can contribute to a continuing investigation of the consequences of war.

Conference experience and current position

Presentations on dioxin contamination demonstrated the continuing importance of the subject. My experience of engagement with the theoretical and methodological task I proposed was nevertheless negative. I regard that engagement as a failure. Neither the availability of AI nor the failures of fragmented investigation became an adequate shared basis for developing the work I was proposing. This judgment records my experience as a participant; it is not a systematic evaluation of the participants' research.

The implication for my own work is direct. I cannot assume that a common concern about war consequences produces a common organization of inquiry. The questions, assumptions and connections between specialized activities must be made explicit.

This article is an interim methodological response in the form of a reconstructed research protocol. It records the development of a position through questions, critical examinations and current decisions. It does not reproduce a verbatim dialogue. It identifies work to be developed rather than presenting a completed project design. Further archival research, collaboration and practical use of information systems should change this position where experience requires it.

2 Why the investigation must extend beyond people

Question

If the principal concern is the consequences of dioxin contamination for people, why should research extend beyond human records and human outcomes?

Position and grounds

The boundaries of the consequence to be explained do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries of the system needed to explain it. A medical finding concerns a person, but the conditions that produced the exposure may lie across an environmental and historical sequence. Human outcomes do not contain a complete account of their own causes.

Dioxins provide a concrete reason for this distinction. The World Health Organization describes their accumulation in food chains and states that more than 90% of human exposure occurs through food, particularly animal products, fish and shellfish (3). This is a general account of exposure, not a reconstructed exposure distribution for each Vietnamese wartime case. It establishes why an investigation of human consequences cannot treat people as an environmentally closed object.

For a particular case, the relevant relationships may involve a source, soil or sediment, movement or retention of contaminants, organisms, food production, consumption and changes in territorial use. Their significance must be established individually. A record of chemical use, a present-day measurement and a health outcome belong to different parts of the investigation. Connecting them requires evidence for the intervening relationships.

Critical examination and decision

Extending the research object does not justify unlimited collection of environmental information. Each expansion should identify the connection needed to answer the question. A relationship may prove weak, historically inapplicable or impossible to reconstruct. These outcomes must remain admissible.

The current decision is to organize research around the relevant relations between people and their environment, while preserving the evidential requirements of health investigation. Environmental evidence can identify an exposure question without resolving a disease attribution. Conversely, uncertainty about disease attribution does not eliminate the need to investigate the environmental process.

The reason for expanding the investigation is therefore material and case-specific. Its adequate boundary follows the relationships needed to explain the consequence.

3 What archives preserve and what remains outside their categories

Question

How should records created from human and institutional perspectives be used to investigate processes that extend beyond those perspectives?

Position

Archives preserve documents created for particular purposes. Reporting damage, recording an operation, administering compensation and conducting a survey select different features of reality. A document's categories reveal what its creators needed, were able or were required to record. The environmental process could continue where that record ended, and could involve relationships that the institution did not investigate.

This does not make the records merely subjective or unsuitable for environmental research. They may preserve observations of nonhuman processes, technical measurements and precise information about places and events. Their evidential value depends on examining how those statements were produced and what they can establish.

The first task is to reconstruct the event or condition described. A second task is to reconstruct the selection through which it entered the record. Absence from a compensation category, for example, cannot by itself establish absence of an environmental consequence. Similarly, a reported cause of damage and an observed condition must remain distinguishable even when they occur in one document.

Critical examination and decision

The two Vietnamese studies provide entry points into different bodies of records. They do not establish in advance that particular wartime and postwar files describe the same place, event or population (1,2). Those connections require historical and geographical work.

The investigation must preserve the original documentary categories while allowing research questions to exceed them. Vietnamese text, translations and later analytical descriptions should remain distinguishable. A source can answer a question its creator never asked, but the researcher must show the reasoning and additional evidence that make this use possible.

Publication is the beginning of this work. The history of documentation must not silently become the boundary of the history being investigated.

4 Why accumulation requires a different organization of inquiry

Question

Why should the publication and translation of more documents be accompanied by an explicit research information system?

Comparative problem

The concern is that document processing could continue for decades while the relationships central to the research problem remain deferred. My analysis of Verdun and the Somme describes a related methodological difficulty: specialized studies can develop detailed knowledge of a territory while causal transitions between its historical and environmental transformations remain weakly reconstructed (4). The comparison concerns the organization of investigation. It does not make the environmental trajectories of Vietnam and the Western Front equivalent.

Archives retain legitimate preservation and historical functions independently of this proposal. The requirement here concerns their use in an investigation of war consequences. For that purpose, the contribution of a document, translation or measurement must be connected to the question it helps answer or clarify.

Epistemological and theoretical commitments

The Scientific Recognition Architecture establishes the common basis: the empirical object takes priority over the initial project design, and uncertainty and changing relationships must remain available to examination (5). The research subject is the selected representation through which the project studies the object. Selection is unavoidable. Treating that representation as the full object creates an avoidable closure.

The theory of military ecotones provides the concrete theoretical direction proposed here. Its development and application to soil direct attention to territorial transformation, environmental relations and subsequent use (6,7). This gives archival searches an explicit orientation. Records concerning vegetation, agriculture, water, settlement and reconstruction may matter alongside records explicitly naming chemical agents.

The framework itself must remain testable. A finding must be able to weaken a hypothesis or require a change in the recognized boundaries of the object. A revised definition must leave a visible history. Alternative frameworks can be examined through the different questions, expectations and empirical tests they produce (8).

Current decision

The information system should organize the work through which these commitments become operational. Its purpose is to preserve the connections between questions, sources, interpretations, objections and next actions. Its usefulness depends on whether those connections can be examined and corrected during investigation.

5 The cognitive samurai complex and the limits of system use

Question

What determines how far a researcher will allow such a system to examine the premises of the investigation?

Initial formulation and correction

In the discussion leading to this protocol, I proposed the cognitive samurai complex as a working name for a difficulty in using explicit research systems. The metaphor draws on the injunction in Hagakure to consider oneself already dead (9). Here it refers to the willingness to relinquish the prior requirement that one's established intellectual position survive the investigation. It is a methodological metaphor, not a psychological diagnosis or an established empirical classification.

The initial discussion emphasized professional vulnerability. Explicit inquiry can expose weaknesses in an expert's position. That interpretation was incomplete. The more fundamental limit can be established by the researcher before any professional conflict occurs: which questions will be admitted, which assumptions may be examined and where inquiry must stop.

I use super-normal science here as a working designation for inquiry whose dominant standard already supplies the admissible questions, procedures and forms of answer, while that standard is kept outside examination. A representative of that mode has no cognitive need for the use of the system proposed here. AI may be adopted to perform established tasks without reopening their premises. This is an analytical distinction between modes of inquiry; institutional membership alone does not determine which mode a person follows.

Critical examination

An information system cannot guarantee openness in the formulation of questions. AI can identify a hidden premise, propose a broader object or challenge an initial question. Those operations can change the inquiry. The researcher nevertheless decides whether to investigate their implications. Technical access to a question does not ensure willingness to pursue it.

The same limit operates outside established scientific institutions. Independence from a particular hierarchy may remove some constraints while leaving attachment to a theory, a preferred explanation or a personal interpretation intact. This requirement applies to the author's own framework and to AI criticism within the system.

Current decision

The cognitive samurai complex names the researcher's willingness to expose the grounds of inquiry to consequential revision. Its relevance lies in the cognitive limits set by the user. The system can make those limits visible; it cannot abolish them by technical design.

Explicitness therefore has a scope. An investigation may document every step inside an accepted question while leaving the question itself unexamined. The system should record consequential alternative questions, the grounds for accepting or rejecting them and decisions to defer them. A deferred question can reflect a justified practical limit. It must remain distinguishable from a claim that the question has no scientific relevance.

This concept requires further development and examination. It is introduced here because it identifies a condition of use that neither greater computing power nor a more elaborate database resolves.

6 What a Vietnamese research information system should initially connect

Working definition

A problem-oriented research information system organizes the formulation and continuing revision of a research problem and connects it with sources, research operations, claims and decisions, while preserving the grounds and limits of their relationships. SRA-PORIS denotes a Problem-Oriented Research Information System based on the Scientific Recognition Architecture. The Vietnamese implementation is a proposal for further work.

Source text and translation

The first connection is between a source version, its exact passage, the Vietnamese transcription and the translation. Repository and archival references must remain attached. Uncertain readings, historical terminology and alternative translations should remain visible where they affect meaning.

Translation must preserve the actor, action, qualifications and force of the original statement. Disagreement belongs in a separate assessment. A faithful translation of an accusation records that accusation; it does not verify its content. Neither anticipated reader reaction nor a modern explanatory preference should silently rewrite the document.

Historical places and territorial trajectories

Historical place identification must retain original names and diacritics, variants, relevant dates, administrative context, candidate matches and the maps or documents used to make the identification. A modern name match cannot establish geographical identity by itself.

A mapped object must state whether it represents an approximate locality, a settlement, an administrative area or a reconstructed event location. Where an area is supported, a precise-looking coordinate must not replace the uncertainty. The territorial account must also distinguish wartime events from subsequent cultivation, reconstruction, remediation and other changes relevant to the case.

Claims and evidence dependencies

A source statement, an independently observed condition, an inference and a causal hypothesis perform different functions. The system must preserve these distinctions. Several documents derived from one report do not provide several independent confirmations. Several AI summaries of that report remain dependent on the same source.

A consequential claim should point to its evidence and any necessary inferential bridge. A correction to a translation or place identification should identify dependent

conclusions for review. The review must determine what actually changes. Mere citation of a corrected source is insufficient grounds for rejecting every associated result.

Next research actions

The system should identify the unresolved relationship that makes the next operation necessary. That operation may be another archival search, comparison of historical maps, examination of an original scientific report or development of a field question.

Where field or laboratory work becomes appropriate, the proposed observation should state which explanation it tests and what comparison it requires. Present-day detection alone does not establish a wartime source or historical exposure. Sampling, analytical methods and attribution require their own grounds. AI can assist in organizing these questions and testing their consistency; it does not supply the missing observations.

These are initial principles for an implementation, not a complete software specification. A workbook with linked source files may be sufficient for a first case. More elaborate infrastructure should follow demonstrated research needs.

7 The immediate continuation and the open status of this article

Current proposal

The immediate next step is to select a small documentary and territorial case with Vietnamese colleagues. The purpose is to test whether original passages, translations, places, claims and unresolved relationships can be maintained as one inspectable investigation. This article does not select a locality or announce an agreed institutional program.

Archival expertise is necessary for documentary context and historical terminology. Geographical and environmental expertise should enter where the question requires it. Cooperation must operate through the same evolving case, so that a revised reading can change a location, a corrected location can change an environmental question and a new observation can reopen an archival interpretation.

A useful initial result would identify what has become established, what has changed and which connection still prevents an answer. If the system merely increases the quantity of processed material while its consequential decisions remain opaque, it has failed the purpose proposed here.

Remaining questions

The first case, the available source images and maps, access and reproduction conditions, responsibilities and the practical cost of maintaining the record remain to be determined. The cognitive samurai complex also requires further clarification through actual use. These are parts of the work ahead, rather than omissions to be concealed by a claim of completeness.

My negative conference experience changes how I intend to proceed. The two Vietnamese articles and presentations have opened an important research opportunity. To

use it, I propose making the organization of understanding explicit from the beginning. That includes examining the formulation of questions and preserving the point at which the researcher chooses to stop.

This article records that intermediate decision. A larger program may produce new concepts, different technical arrangements and reasons to revise the present framework. Its direction remains the investigation of the object and the relationships through which the consequences of war develop.

Declarations

Use of artificial intelligence

ChatGPT assisted in the critical discussion, reconstruction of the protocol, restructuring of the supplied manuscript and preparation of the English text. The author's positions and the critical examinations are presented as an edited reconstruction, not verbatim dialogue. AI output is not independent archival or environmental evidence. Responsibility for the article and its submission remains with the human author.

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Competing interests

The author is Editor-in-Chief of Pollution and Diseases, developed the Scientific Recognition Architecture and is developing the SRA-PORIS approach and an associated consultation service. These interests do not exempt the proposed framework from critical examination.

Data availability

The article draws on the cited publications, the author's earlier manuscript, participant experience and the research discussion reconstructed here. It reports no new environmental measurements, clinical dataset or completed survey of Vietnamese archival holdings. Original records remain subject to the access and reproduction conditions of their repositories. The complete research conversation is not reproduced.

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