

**'SORRY ABOUT THAT ...'
BERNARD FALL,
THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE IMPACT
OF A FRENCH INTELLECTUAL IN THE US**

BY

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INTRODUCTION

If several of the chapters in this collection have rightly examined the anti-war movement in Europe, this reflection takes up the subject from the flip-side by considering how a unique European intellectual – a Frenchman named Bernard B. Fall – came to have a remarkable impact on the American understanding of the war in the US to this day. Neither a hawk nor a dove, Fall was perhaps the most influential scholar writing on Vietnam in America until his untimely death in 1967. He relied on his profound knowledge of the preceding French war and never balked at saying things that did not always please the American or the Vietnamese powers that be. He saw himself as an independent, academic critic and, if need be, a dissenter. This essay will examine the impact that this French intellectual had on the American understanding of the war and how his increasing opposition to the war in Vietnam would sow doubt in American confidence in the validity of their military commitment to this part of the world.

GROWING UP FAST

Bernard Fall was on the move until the day he died accompanying US marines on a patrol north of Hue. He was born into a Jewish merchant family in Vienna, Austria, on 19 November 1926. In 1937, as Hitler enforced his *Anschluss* policy to swallow Austria whole, the Fall family hustled their eleven year-old son and his younger sister, Lisette, off to France. Bernard was placed in a Parisian elementary school, where he soon learned to speak and write French just as fluently as his native German. In 1939, his parents rejoined their children. Following the Nazi

invasion of France in mid-1940, the entire family fled to the *zone libre* in the south, where Bernard continued his studies in Nice and then in Cannes (1).

WWII changed Fall's life forever. Most scarring of all was the Nazi murder of his parents. In August 1942, his mother was arrested and sent to the infamous concentration camp in Drancy before being shipped off to Auschwitz. She never returned. Fall's father had already taken a stand against Nazism, when he joined the underground French resistance. On 27 November 1943, the Gestapo arrested Bernard's father and tortured him to death. Bernard had himself secretly entered the French underground resistance on 8 November 1942 – the very day the Allies invaded North Africa. While one can only imagine the impact of these painful events on an adolescent, one thing is sure: at the age of 16, the young Bernard was on his own in a Europe that had spun out of control.

Like the Viet Minh he would study later, Fall got his first taste as a French *maquisard* of what it meant to fight a guerrilla war against a militarily superior occupying power. He first joined the *Forces françaises de l'Intérieur* (FFI) before moving into the *Groupes francs de la Résistance* in the Alps, and then finally landed in the *Groupe ment FFI Haute-Savoie*. During this time, he learned the importance of total secrecy, air-tight organisation, and gained hands-on experience about the dangers and finer points of guerrilla warfare. During the liberation, he joined the 1st French Army under the command of General de Lattre de Tassigny. He was then transferred to the 27th Alpine Division and finally into the Moroccan 4th Mountain Division. While he saw some real combat at this time, his perfect knowledge of German landed him quickly in the French Army's Intelligence Service, where he worked until his demobilisation from the Army in March 1946 (2).

Fall would understandably always be proud of his service in the French Resistance. As he explained in 1966, he and his comrades had fought for an ideal. The resistance also confirmed his French identity. He came out of WWII a fully French nineteen-year-old war veteran. Injured slightly twice during the war, he held the *Médaille de la France*

(1) Bernard Fall, 'Curriculum vitae', dated February 1956 and his French language 'Curriculum vitae', dated 15 February 1965, both in box F1, Bernard Fall Collection, John F. Kennedy Library [hereafter cited as JFK], Boston, USA. For an excellent review of Fall's life and works, see: Philippe Devillers, 'Bernard Fall', *France-Asie/Asie*, no. 188, (Winter 1966-1967), pp. 147-160. My deepest thanks to Dorothy Fall and Lisette Bired for their kind assistance.

(2) Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War*, foreword by Don Oberdorfer, Mechanicsburg, PA, Stackpole Books, 2000, p. 20 and Devillers, 'Bernard Fall', p. 148 and his French language cv. Fall claims in his cv that he had first joined the First Alpine Division, which then became the 27th division.

libérée. If anyone dared to call into question this young Jew's Frenchness, they did so at their own peril. But Fall was also at home and remarkably at ease in American society and culture. He had first met America during WWII through the friendships he forged with American soldiers and officers he encountered at the end of the war in France and then in occupied Germany. He would later describe the liberation of France as 'just one vast orchestration of Glenn Miller. [...] you actually could hear an actual transmission of Glenn Miller and it so much represented the Americans in the confident, rich, lovable characters. You know, this was not an army of professionals – these were the American citizens, the guy on the street – the New York taxi driver – this was to us the first Americans whom we ever saw in our lives' (3). The combination of his military and resistance background, an emerging flair for putting himself at the right place at the right time, and his astonishing ability to master American English in its weirdest forms would help him make vital contacts and gain real trust in US elite circles.

Upon his release from the French Army in March 1946, Fall turned his building intellectual curiosity elsewhere. He worked as a translator for the American General Staff between 1946 and 1948. In 1946, thanks to his fluency in German and no doubt his contacts with the Americans, he also joined a research team working for the *War Crimes for the International Court of Nuremberg*. In 1949, he joined the *Service International de Recherche des Nations Unies*, where he worked until 1950.

THE MAKING OF A VIETNAM EXPERT

Research clearly attracted this very curious mind. He realised that if research and learning were his priorities, he would have to complete the studies he had never finished because of WWII. He needed a University education. In 1948, all the while working, he obtained an undergraduate diploma in Law at the Sorbonne University, and another at the Ludwig Max University in Munich in 1949 in economics (4). In 1950-1951, he completed a degree in Political Science at the American University in the Allied Zone in Germany. At this point, Bernard Fall was determined to move on. In 1951, he obtained a Franco-American study scholarship that allowed him to travel to the United States for the first time. This, perhaps more than anything else, was a turning point in his life. Thanks to the 'US Army Overseas Program', he enrolled in the University of Maryland and around 1951 to pursue his studies in political science and eco-

(3) Fall, *Last Reflections on a War*, pp. 20-21.

(4) Fall, 'Curriculum vitae' in French and English.

nomics. He continued to work in his spare time, as an assistant manager to the *Stars & Stripes* newspaper. He would remain in touch with the American military and conducted research projects for them into the late 1950s at least (5). In 1952, he completed his Masters Degree in Political Science at Syracuse University in New York, with a thesis on the illegal rearmament of the Weimar Republic (6). It was also during this time that he met and married his American wife, Dorothy, an accomplished artist.

Fall's decision to focus on Vietnam was an accident. It came when one of his professors at John Hopkins suggested that he capitalise on his military experience and his knowledge of French to study what was going on in Indochina. Enthralled by the idea, Fall ran with it. He enrolled in the PhD programme in international relations at Syracuse University and undertook research for what would soon become a magisterial thesis on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Viet Minh. The subject appealed to his own experiences as a French guerrilla fighter and his passion for military things. In 1953, thanks again to his own savings, he spent six fruitful months conducting research in war-torn Vietnam. There, his personality, his time in the French resistance, his fluency in French, and his sensitivity to the fighting soldier and the young 'centurion' officers hanging on against an increasingly powerful DRV and, as Fall put it, deaf French politicians, opened doors to him which few of his pairs could have penetrated. He conducted scores of interviews with French and Vietnamese officers, soldiers and personalities engaged in the war against the Viet Minh. He obtained a gold mine of information. Anyone who has read his book on the Viet Minh and sifted through files at the *Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre* in Vincennes will quickly realise that Fall obtained many low and mid-level 2ème Bureau reports on the Viet Minh and captured documents. A large portion of his thesis reflects his reliance on this documentation. Back in

(5) He saw such cooperation as a natural continuation of earlier collaboration from the WWII period. From 1955 to 1956, for example, Fall was a research associate for the 'Human Relations Area Files (HRAF)', which had been a former contractor with the Office of the Chief of Psychological Warfare (OCPW) in the US Department of Defence. Soon after he completed his PhD, he gave regular lectures on Vietnam at the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, at the Naval War College and at Fort Bragg. He published in a number of military journals, including the prestigious *Military Review*. Speaking of his research work for the HRAF, Fall explained in a letter that he had put 'own personal research files (four complete legal size file drawers) at the disposal of the team and the US army in order to make our effort as good as could be for the purpose of furthering national defence, regardless of the fact that those files had been collected in Indochina at considerable personal expense and risk of life (I was there in 1953) to be used for further publication'. Letter from Bernard Fall to the Chief of Special Warfare, DOS, dated February 19, 1960, signed Fall, box F1, Fall Papers, JFK Archives.

(6) Fall, 'Curriculum vitae' in French.

the US, Fall submitted his PhD in 1954 on the birth and the evolution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) between 1945 and 1954. It provided the first serious study in any Western language of the nature of the 'enemy'. His thesis came exactly when the US military and political leaders were becoming increasingly involved in Vietnam. Fall's thorough and scrupulous PhD thesis furnished him with a vital academic imprimatur.

The fact that Fall ran on high and sustained levels of adrenalin certainly helped. He was tireless, driven, and ambitious, determined to take advantage of the favourable conjuncture in order to become one day soon, as he put it, 'the foremost military writer of my generation' on Vietnam (7). Between 1954 and his death in 1967, Fall published six major books that transformed him into the leading specialist in America on contemporary Vietnam. Other than Philippe Devillers, few could rival him from this point. In 1956, he published an abridged version of his thesis entitled *The Viet-Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (8). In France, Armand Colin published a revised and expanded French version of it as *Le régime Viet Minh: La République Démocratique du Viet-Nam, 1945-1960*, with a preface by the famous French scholar of Southeast Asia, Paul Mus (9). In 1961, he published *Street Without Joy*, also published in France as *L'Indochine en guerre, 1946 à 1954* (re-edited in 1962 as *Indochine 1946-1962: Chronique d'une guerre révolutionnaire*). His third book, *The Two Vietnams*, would be reedited in English several times and translated into French (10). He published a collection of his most incisive and critical essays on Vietnam and the French and American experiences there in a fourth publication entitled *Vietnam Witness* (11). He returned to the French war for his fifth book on the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu: *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (12). Shortly after his death, his wife edited a volume of Fall's most penetrating and perhaps moving essays on the war, entitled *Last Reflections on a*

(7) Bernard Fall Killed in Vietnam by a mine while with marines', *The New York Times*, (22 February 1967).

(8) Bernard Fall, *The Viet-Minh Regime*, New York, Pacific Relations Institute and Cornell University, 1956.

(9) Bernard Fall, *La République Démocratique du Viet-Nam, 1945-1960*, Paris, Librairie Armand Colin/FNSP, 1960, with a preface by Paul Mus.

(10) Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1964 (2nd edition, 1967).

(11) Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1966.

(12) Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, Pall Mall Press, 1966.

War: *Bernard Fall's Last Comments on Vietnam*. It was reprinted in 2000 (13).

To this day, Fall's books continue to be re-issued systematically, at least in the US where Fall has acquired almost cult status among a large following of military amateurs, cadets, and former veterans. Specialists and instructors also continue to read his books for a better understanding of the 'other' side, the DRV and the Republic of Vietnam. Fall's books still appear on the reading lists in major American University syllabi on the Vietnam wars and in strategic studies (14).

In 1957, Fall institutionalised his career and his status, when he joined Howard University as an assistant professor of international relations in a college for African-American students. In the thick of the civil rights movement in the US, he seems to have thrived there, teaching international relations and no doubt Vietnam when he was not writing books or in the field. He soon became professor, and held the international relations chair at Howard University until his death in 1967 (15). Besides teaching and writing his books, Fall still found the time to write more than 100 articles, dealing with a wide-range of political, military, religious and social aspects of Vietnam in particular and Asia in general. He was critical, careful, and cautious. He was also impetuous. Fall did not hesitate to point out to others when they got it wrong, something which did not always earn him allies. In 1966, he never thought twice when he wrote a letter to *The New York Times*, pointing out to its readers where General Maxwell Taylor had erred and misled the Senate hearings on Vietnam.

Besides his books, his remarkable mastery of American English, his wartime experience, and knowledge of military matters, Fall's personality facilitated his meteoric rise to near celebrity status. He did it very much in the 'American way', as he confided to Devillers, by cultivating his name via radio, television, scores of newspaper articles and his own ability to 'sell' himself. It is hard to think of another Frenchman to this day who wrote as regularly and as influentially in the pages of *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Washington Post*, *Ramparts*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Newsweek*, *Military History*, *The Naval War College Review*, or the *New Republic* among others. By 1965, Fall could boast that he was read by McNamara down

(13) Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War, op. cit.*

(14) For example in strategic studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins. See: http://www.sais.jhu.edu/depts/strategic/cohen/Core_reading.htm Bernard Fall is core reading for Danny Unger's course on 'Politics and Film at Northern Illinois University': <http://www3.niu.edu/acad/profssol/fal02ecourses/395.html>

(15) Fall, 'Curriculum vitae' in the French-language.

to the lowly private in an America increasingly hungry for information on this country to which they were increasingly and rapidly committed politically and militarily.

THE ORIGINALITY OF FALL'S APPROACH

There is no doubt that coming out of WWII, in light of his relations with the American armed forces, and in view of his sympathy for the French men fighting against the 'communists' in Vietnam, Fall was a Cold Warrior. Geo-politically, he certainly saw China and North Vietnam as potential threats to Southeast Asian stability and to the 'Free World'. This is clear in his writings and in the Cold War language he used in his writings into the early 1960s. Fall believed, like many others at the time, in the Domino Theory (16). If he was fascinated by the Viet Minh and revolutionary warfare, it was in terms of shutting them down. He was in favour of an independent non-communist South Vietnam. He was initially supportive of Ngo Dinh Diem, at least until the latter horrified him by provoking an indigenous southern resistance. Fall feared that Diem's repressive policies would play directly into Hanoi's hands and lead to a wider 'revolutionary war'. Fall was not opposed to US support and intervention in favour of defending the Republic of Vietnam. He felt it was necessary to preserving freedom and protecting the region against communist infiltration. In 1959, Fall himself received a grant from the *South-East Asia Treaty Organisation* to study the communist movement in Vietnam. Fall's anti-communism, as well as his wartime service and hard hitting personality, would make it hard for 'hawks' to write him off as some sort of lost 'dove'.

Fall was certainly no Wilfred Burchett (an Australian communist who covered, sympathetically, 'revolutionary wars' from the 'other side') (17). He was no fellow traveller. What he first learned of Vietnam came from the likes of French experts Philippe Devillers and Paul Mus

(16) Fall's view of the legitimacy of America's protective role in Southeast Asia lasted until at least 1965. 'Viet Nam Dialog', *Chicago Daily*, (27 March 1965), p. 13.

(17) On Burchett and Vietnam, see the excellent article penned by David Mark in Ben Kieman, ed., *Burchett - Reporting from the Other Side of the World, 1939-1983*, London, Quartet Books, 1986, pp. 212-239. In an amazing oversight, the American author Michael Lind, who takes 'liberal' (read 'leftist' for him) writers on Vietnam to task for their overly sympathetic treatment of the DRV during the Vietnam War, fails to discuss any of Fall's work, other than saying offhandedly that he was an 'unusual' exception for a 'left-of-center' writer and noting that he had criticised the DRV's land reform. This is a flawed reading of Fall ('left-of-center' means little analytically in Fall's case). See: Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict*, New York, The Free Press, 1999, pp. 152-153.

on the one hand and what he observed and learned in Vietnam in 1953 and from his own intellectual development. Unlike Burchett, Fall never travelled to Viet Minh zones during the French war to study the 'other side'. What he learned about the Viet Minh, at least until 1962, came from a vast array of published sources, Western military and civilian authorities, captured documents, interviews with allies, or from defectors. He travelled with the French and American infantry, in their planes, helicopters, and jeeps. Fall had begun intensive Vietnamese language lessons. Unfortunately, he passed away before he could put this powerful weapon to the test.

If Burchett supported Hanoi's revolutionary cause, Fall believed in the viability of a separate southern Vietnamese state. He also believed well into the 1960s in the power of American foreign aid, insisting that the DRV could be wooed over from the communist superpowers. 'Massive economic aid', he would always say, 'might swing the balance' the American way. As he said in a letter to a US interlocutor shortly after Dien Bien Phu:

Viet Minh weaknesses. Plenty: first of all, they're hampered by their own party line. Reports of Vietminh auto-critiques which I read show that 'bureaucratism', outright favoritism (tax exemption, allotment of the best farmland, etc) to party stalwarts, doesn't endear them to populace. First and foremost, however: economic ruin - for they are ruined. Their money, the Ho Chi Minh piastre isn't backed by anything and is pegged anywhere between 4 to 6,000 piastres vs. one of the Indochina bank. A pack of cigarettes, 3.5 piastres in our zone, is 3,000 in there and a bike is 1.2 million there. Hence, we can make the VM [Viet Minh] government look sick if the country is NOT split! Red China and Russia can't help the VM government economically on the scale it needs it after 8 yrs of war... That's where US can win the day, for you can 'deliver the goods' in the true sense of the term US economic impact aid given to all of the country (as is done in Austria - ALISO to Soviet Zone) handled via UN (ECAFE), as to forestall 'imperialism' criticisms, could swing the balance for us - that's MY pet idea - know any takers? - and make the Com-mies lose control. Asia still goes out for the biggest rice bowl and never mind the sloppy sentiments (18).

That said, Fall duly noted the strengths of the adversary, as his two books *Hell in a Very Small Place* and the *Street Without Joy* make perfectly clear. But unlike Burchett, Fall also critiqued the DRV regime, their land reform in the 1950s for example. He was among the first to write critically of Hanoi's repression of greater internal calls for real

(18) 'Letter to Mr. White', dated May [unclear, circa 1955], signed Bernard Fall, box F-1, Fall Papers, JFK Archives. Unbeknownst to Fall, around 1950 the US had explored making such economic overtures to the DRV in a bid to wean the Vietnamese communists away from Moscow and Beijing.

democratic reform during the *Nhan Van Giai Pham Affair* in northern Vietnam between 1954 and 1956 (19). Fall also remained committed to the highest levels of objectivity. Indeed, getting it 'right' was, I would argue, his intellectual obsession. Rather than accepting at face value the virulently anti-communist memoir written by a disillusioned fellow traveller who stayed on in Hanoi after 1954, Fall pointed out the patent exaggerations of Gérard Tsongas' polemical book: *L'enfer communiste au Nord Vietnam* (20). Fall was no *anti-communist primaire*, despite his patent Cold War language (which, significantly, he would alter in later publications).

Fall was, to borrow an expression from perhaps his favourite writer, Jean Lartéguy (21), a bit of a 'centurion'. He saw himself as a soldier's historian. He was proud of his role in the French resistance and would always be attracted to romantic notions of war, bravery, gallantry and camaraderie. He was truly an unlikely professor. He captured the respect of American and French military 'grunts' by his close attention to their experiences. And he attracted military leaders and officers by his writing on the French experience in Indochina, his close attention to military questions, not to mention his ability to communicate these ideas and descriptions in engaging and accurate English prose. In 1953, he travelled with French and Foreign Legion combat units in Indochina, and he would do the same with US marines, including the venture that cost him his life in 1967. His influence in American military circles is enormous. He remains to this day on the required readings lists of several US military academies (22). Lt. Colonel Harold Moore, a battalion commander of the 1st Cavalry Division in 1965, who participated in the bloody battle at Ia Drang in November of 1965, reveals in his memoir that he had 're-read' Bernard Fall's *Street Without Joy* on the boat ride to Vietnam. As he flew into the highlands in 1965, he recognised the small airstrip, from which the GM100 had left before being wiped out by the Viet Minh some eleven years earlier (23). A few years later, Fall was still on the minds of ranking American military commanders as they headed into another bloody in the 'street without joy'

(19) Bernard B. FALL, 'Crisis in North Viet-Nam', *Far Eastern Survey*, (January 1957), pp. 12-15.

(20) Gérard TONGAS, *J'ai vécu dans l'enfer communiste au Nord Viet-Nam et j'ai choisi la liberté*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Debrasse, 1960.

(21) It might be noted that, to this day, Lartéguy has quite a cult among cadets in American military academies.

(22) US Naval Academy, U. S. Marine Corps Reading List, <http://www.usna.edu/Library/Marinerad.htm>

(23) Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. GALLOWAY, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young*, New York, Random House, 1992, pp. 29-30.

at Khe Sanh. For once, the lessons of the French experience seem to have penetrated into higher levels of the American government and military establishment. Even Lyndon Johnson declared he did not 'want any damn dinbinfoo' at Khe Sanh. As a military historian of the Battle of Khe Sanh has written:

The guns had fallen silent at Dienbienphu only thirteen years ago, but the battle had already been accorded classic status. Captain Budge, who was Westmoreland's personal aide, had already read another brilliant work on Dienbienphu, Bernard Fall's 'Hell in a Very Small Place'. This book, too, was covered in red cloth. Like poppies, Fall and [Jules] Roy bloomed on the khaki bookshelves of every thoughtful officer in the United States military — in the Canal Zone as well as in Saigon. Fall and Roy were textbooks at West Point, and they had been translated into German and Russian and Spanish. When the 304th North Vietnamese Army division was first identified near Khe Sanh in early 1968, the intelligence report used a description lifted verbatim from the appendices of 'Hell in a Very Small Place'. As soon as Westmoreland's aide finished Roy's book, he planned to read Fall again from the new perspective of 'The Battle of Dienbienphu'. Everyone read and thought about Dienbienphu (24).

FALL'S IMPACT ON US MILITARY THINKING : COUNTERINSURGENCY

Fall was equally fascinated by another type of war he discovered in Vietnam in 1953: the unconventional one, the guerrilla war, which would come to obsess him (25). During his first trip to Vietnam in 1953, Fall met a wide range of young French officers, who introduced him to the complexities of fighting what French strategists had recently come to call a 'revolutionary war'. Fall would remain in touch with these officers in order to write his major works on the war. The evolution of French counter-insurgency thinking during the Indochina War and then on an even greater scale in Algeria had an important impact on Fall's thinking, writing and warnings on the American experience. Anyone who has read some of Fall's works knows that he was keenly aware of the finer points of the new French military thinking on fighting guerrilla movements, Vietnamese communism, and what became known as 'revolutionary' or 'modern' warfare, in short what the Americans came

(24) Robert Pison, *The End of the Line: The Siege of Khe Sanh*, New York, Ballantine Books, 1982, pp. 101-102.

(25) When Fall left for what would be his last trip to Vietnam, he was doing research for a book on the 'Viet Cong' guerrilla movement.

to translate as counter-insurgency warfare (26). Fall had clearly studied and possibly met such French military strategists as Charles Lacheroy and most probably Roger Trinquier (some of whom would land themselves in jail when they went way too far in applying 'modern warfare' to France itself) (27).

As the US became involved in counter-insurgency operations under the Kennedy administration, Fall began to write voluminously on the Vietnamese and French sides of the counterinsurgency question. That these two sides of the equation went together in Fall's thinking is clear in four books he edited. On the Vietnamese side, they are his introduction and notes to Truong Chinh's *Primer for Revolt: The Communist Takeover in Vietnam*, (New York, Praeger, 1963) and his introduction to Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, (New York, Praeger, 1963). On French experiences in counter-insurgency: in 1964 he published an internal case study for the Special Operation Research Office of the American University entitled: *Case Studies in Insurgency and Revolutionary Warfare: Vietnam, 1941-1954*. More revealing is the introduction for the English translations of Roger Trinquier's influential (and controversial) book, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, (New York, Praeger, 1964) (28).

I cannot go into detail here on Fall's role in introducing and transmitting French ideas on counterinsurgency to the US. While the Americans certainly had their sources of information, Fall's increasingly intimate knowledge of the evolution and methods of French counterinsurgency methods in Indochina and Algeria, his perfect French and English, and his military background from the French *maquis* made him well equipped to communicate them effectively to an American audience. The fact that he knew some of the French architects of these ideas only facilitated the process. As he put it in his introductory note to the English-language translation of Trinquier's book on 'revolutionary warfare': 'The French army officer, to a far greater extent than his British-American counterpart, has spent the last quarter of a century fighting desperate rear-guard actions against highly politicised irregulars'.

(26) Bernard Fall, 'The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counter-insurgency', in *Last Reflections on a War*, pp. 209-223.

(27) On these two and their roles in the Indochina and Algerian wars, see: Paul and Marie-Catherine Villatoux, *La guerre et l'action psychologique en France (1945-1960)*, thess, Paris, Université Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002.

(28) Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1964. Praeger published Fall's most important books.

While there were contradictions in Fall's faith in transferring the French military model to the States, he understood that the US was not going to be able to win in Vietnam by fighting a conventional war. B-52s and Agent Orange were fine and dandy, he said, but the Vietnam quagmire was a different type of war. He was relentless in attacking budding American faith in hi-tech modern warfare. One lesson he learned from the French counter-insurgency specialists was that this was a war for the control of the civilian populations. Indiscriminate bombing and hi-tech weapons would not win against the nifty-gritty politically minded NLF or NVA soldier fighting on the ground and among the people. While Fall clearly and emphatically balked at Trinquier's advocacy of torture in this 'revolutionary war', he agreed that with him that :

In revolutionary war (or, as Trinquier calls it throughout the book, italicising the term for emphasis, '*modern warfare*'), the allegiance of the civilian population becomes one of the most vital objectives of the whole struggle. This is indeed the key message that Trinquier seeks to impress upon his reader: Military tactics and hardware are all well and good, but they are really quite useless if one has lost the confidence of the population among whom one is fighting (29).

In another instance, Fall spoke to American cadets about Charles Lachero's famous *hiérarchies parallèles* (parallel hierarchies), first developed in Indochina in the early 1950s to fight the Viet Minh's organisational structure cell by cell. As one colleague described Fall: 'His spirit had been shaped and tempered by guerrilla warfare'. Both in his lectures and in his publications, Fall played an important intellectual role (though he was by no means the sole) in transferring French counter-insurgency and revolutionary warfare ideas to the US military. A good example is his lecture to the *Industrial College of the Armed Forces*. Fall gave this internal lecture on 18 January 1963, entitled: *Counterinsurgency: The French Experience* (30). He pointed out that Western armies emerged from WWII thinking that 'guerrilla forces cannot win a war. Guerrilla forces may be precious adjuncts to winning a war, but they may not really 'win' in the accepted sense of the term'. Fall stressed the link between guerrillas and the civilian environment and the importance of understanding the Vietnam War in terms of its political context. He urged cadets to read Mao Zedong's *Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War*, published in 1936, and French gen-

eral Gabriel Bonnet's work on *Insurrectional and Revolutionary Warfare from Antiquity to Today*. The Vietnamese communist warfare was 25% military and 75% political, he insisted: 'Revolutionary war is the product of the application of guerrilla methods to the furtherance of an ideology or of a political system' (31). Fighting this war with 'modern' conventional methods, Fall insisted, was destined to failure: 'The fact is that we get high kill figures such as '62 Viet Cong killed', but out of this number, 'maybe 8 or 9 were actually Viet Cong, and the rest are just hapless villagers who were caught in the strafing'. He added that the French found 'this caused more villagers to become rebels, rather than vice versa and I know that the same question is being debated in Vietnam today'.

This was a different war. The 'communist revolutionary warfare warrior', Fall warned, was out to break down the enemy's commitment. And air power would not win the day, something which the wizards in the Pentagon, such as Robert McNamara, most certainly did not want to hear. To win, Fall felt, the people and the military had to be on the same side. If not, then the US or any army for that matter was bound to lose. He stressed that even the French army in Algeria, whose army had technically won the war, lost it on purely political grounds. De Gaulle had to accept it, and Fall warned that the US may well have to do the same. In 1962, at the height of Kennedy's interest in unconventional, revolutionary warfare, Fall told *Newsweek's* François Sully that US military assistance to Saigon was not enough: 'But we must not forget that this is a revolutionary war, that is, a military operation with heavy political overtones. To win the military battle but lose the political war could well become the US fate in Vietnam'. Fall put his truth bluntly: 'A US Marine can fly a helicopter better than anyone else, but he simply cannot indoctrinate peasants with an ideology worth fighting for' (32). Fall was not necessarily opposed to US policy on Vietnam, but he warned that it demanded a different type of military science.

Fall's books were among the things junior American officers and grunts carried with them. Some of these lieutenants would go on to greater things. As General Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 1991 Gulf War and currently Secretary of State, put it recently in a television interview: 'we all read Bernard Fall as part of our training'. He added: 'we probably all should have studied Bernard Fall a lot longer and with greater intensity, especially people in

(29) Fall in the preface to Trinquier's *Modern Warfare*, p. ix.

(30) Bernard Fall, 'Counterinsurgency: The French Experience', dated 18 January 1963, Publication no. L63-109, Industrial War College of the Armed Forces, Washington, D.C., official use.

(31) Fall, 'Counterinsurgency: The French Experience'.

(32) François Sully, 'Vietnam: The Unpleasant Truth', *Newsweek*, (20 August 1962), pp. 28-29.

high policy positions, because he made it clear and we should have realised that it was a war as much about nationalism and self-determination within this one country than it is about the ideology of communism or the worldwide Communist conspiracy' (33). But the scepticism which Fall's books sowed remained limited to the lower level of the military machine. Westmoreland says in a *Soldier Reports* that he had little time to read during his execution of the military operations. It is hard to tell how high Fall's scepticism went in the US armed forces. Fall, who could certainly get a bit carried away with his own self-importance, claimed it went high. I am less sure.

BERNARD FALL AND THE RIGHT TO DISSENT

As American involvement in Vietnam expanded, he found himself increasingly critical of US policy. This shift may well have occurred during his trip to Hanoi in 1962, when he discovered the 'other side' for the first time and interviewed Ho Chi Minh (34). Fall saw that the 'communists' had faces and that the thorny issue of Vietnam was not just a military or counterinsurgency problem. There was a political side. Fall reported that if a negotiated settlement were not found, then a bloody war would follow, because it was a 'war which Ho Chi Minh is well prepared to fight'. Judging from the articles he wrote on his return, he clearly realised that the 'communists' were not mere machines, but that they had a nationalist cause as well as an ideological one. In 1967, in *Esquire*, Fall painted a rather favourable portrait of Ho Chi Minh. At his best, he opened by citing a complaint from an American psych-ops expert: 'You know, it's damned difficult to go out and tell people to hate a guy who looks like a half-starved Santa Clause'. Fall chimed in:

Stalin also provided us with a convenient hate-figure which could be easily caricaturised with a blood-dripping knife protruding from under the hooked moustache; and Mao Tsetung does not do badly what with 700 million Chinese playing Yellow Peril as if hired by Central Casting. But with Ho Chi Minh, we enter the era of what could be called the 'Hate Gap'. It is difficult for the United States to believably depict a frail seventy seven year old gentleman with a wispy beard and rubber sands [...] as a 'threat to freedom of Southeast Asia' (35).

(33) Cited by Don Oberdorfer, *Last Reflections on a War*, foreword, p. 10. See also: Colin Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *An American Journey: An Autobiography*, New York, Random House, 1995, p. 147.

(34) Bernard Fall, 'Master of the Red Jab', *Reporting Vietnam, Part I: American Journalism, 1959-1969*, New York, The Library of America, 1998, pp. 47-57. First published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, (24 November 1962).

(35) Bernard Fall, 'Man behind a War: Ho Chi Minh', in *Reflections on a War*, pp. 59-60.

Fall became more vocal in his doubts about the war in the early 1960s and in clear terms from 1965. For one, he was highly critical of the Saigon regime, its corruption, its failed land reform, and criticised American officials who continued to advertise Ngo Dinh Diem as the best non-communist nationalist leader to lead the Republic. While Fall may have supported Diem at the outset, by the late 1950s he held him personally accountable for unnecessary political and religious repression and considered him responsible for the emergence of the National Liberation Front and the outbreak of civil war. In 1966, Fall pointed out that pacification through counterinsurgency had been anything but a success. Without reform of the Republic – and precisely in a time of war –, there could be no victory against the guerrillas. Fall's criticism did not endear him to the Saigon regime. Moreover, his serious treatment and critique of the Republic of Vietnam in the *Two Vietnams* would later be used by those who were increasingly opposed to the war and American support of the Republic. In 1966, he explained in the influential *Foreign Affairs* journal that he wanted the US to make the 'Saigon government and the National Liberation Front leaders the centre of all future negotiations with the United States and North Vietnam in a back-up position'. Massive US aid, he repeated again, and even an ill-defined *piastre* zone, could create the favourable conditions for a truly independent southern Republic, capable of surviving over the long haul.

In the mid-1960s, Fall became increasingly vocal in his critique of American policies, perhaps not in the anti-war sense that developed shortly after his death in 1967, but as an independent critic, as he put it forcefully in the introduction to *Vietnam Witness*, published in 1966. In this collection of essays, he argued that the US was repeating mistakes made by the French and that Washington's spin doctors had created what he called a 'false reality' that misinterpreted the facts or, worse, 'deliberately' dismissed them as irrelevant to the problem. It was, for example, a 'false reality' to think that Ngo Dinh Diem was 'well on his way to both democracy and economic 'take-off' when it was assailed by North Vietnamese aggressors and rapidly reduced to shambles' (36). Like Hanoi, Fall wrote, 'South Vietnam had been converted into a full-fledged dictatorship at the village level – where it was most keenly felt in that kind of society – as early as 1956' and that the Diem 'regime had been nearly toppled twice before the eventually successful coup – and by his own military rather than the left wing opposition.' (37). For the

(36) *Vietnam Witness*, p. 5.

(37) *Vietnam Witness*, p. 5.

first time, Fall expounded on what he saw as the role of the intellectual in such trying times, and how he saw his own role in particular :

This is where the independent scholar comes into his own as a curious sort of barometer or litmus paper. He is — or should be, if he deserves the designation of 'independent scholar' — capable of recording the facts in a given situation as they actually are; and, unburdened by considerations of policy or feudal allegiance to the views of a particular bureaucracy or service, he can make certain predictions of true developments [...] But in the case of such an area as Viet-Nam he will also have to bear the burden of being the unwelcome bearer of ill-tidings. That has been the role of this writer for the past thirteen years, as the selection of articles presented here will attest (38).

Fall advocated the right of the scholar to 'think independently' of the standard line, without being taxed of heresy or nationalist treason :

If anything, this volume is less a plea and an example for the right to dissent — for dissent, too, has its 'organization men' — than for the right to think *independently* and to have one's thoughts accepted and seriously weighed. University and foundation reports indicate only too clearly and too often that scholarship has in many cases become a new kind of 'big business'. In the long run, this may well stifle the yearning for the unexplored paths and for dissent of a higher level and great import than a medieval theologians' debate around safely established basic verities (39).

In January 1965, during an appearance on the highly influential *Meet the Press* and about a month before the systematic bombing of North Vietnam began, Fall claimed that massive air power could not win the war : 'The Indochina war had confirmed once more — the Korean conflict being, by and large, another example — the limited usefulness of air superiority in wars involving developing areas'. Air power was 'far more superficial than is often realised'. As for getting involved, he said that 'American interests are involved' in Vietnam, but added that 'whether vital or not, I don't think so' (40). Fall predicted a stand-off, at best and the wearing down of the US resolve. 'Bombing North Vietnam', Fall said, would be militarily meaningless' (41).

Fall's tough talk in early January returned to haunt him a few months later. Having seen American air power in action in Vietnam with his own eyes in mid-1965, Fall back-pedalled. What he saw in Vietnam this time jolted Fall out of his French Indochina view of the war and out of his counterinsurgency-guerrilla reading of it. Fall now admitted that US firepower was simply awesome, capable of changing

(38) *Vietnam Witness*, p. 6.

(39) *Vietnam Witness*, p. 12.

(40) The National Broadcasting Company, 'Meet the press', produced by Lawrence E. Spivak, Guest : Dr. Bernard Fall, volume 9, January 31, 1965, no. 4, pp. 1-11.

(41) 'Meet the press, Guest : Dr. Bernard Fall', pp. 1-11.

the nature of the war, capable of defeating Hanoi. *Newsweek* declared that the expert was 'now convinced that American air- and fire-power will carry the field'. McNamara must have privately rubbed his hands in joy (42). If the press and the White House jumped on Fall's change in attitude, they left out the second part of his new analysis insisting that the immense influx of American firepower, 'and the ruthless use of the latter', made the war 'in the short run, militarily 'unlosable'', but at a huge cost : the destruction of Vietnam. Fall cited Tacitus in the opening of his article in *The New Republic* : 'They have made a desert, and have called it peace' (43).

Indeed, back from Vietnam this time, Fall expressed his horror in two particularly important articles, one in the journal *Current* in October 1965 and another he penned in the anti-war journal *Ramparts* (44). Fall was more critical than ever of the American war and in particular of the type of war the Americans were making. As he wrote in *Current* :

What broke at Dien Bien Phu was France's will to resist — not her ability. And there, it seems, lies the greatest difference between Vietnam in 1954 and Vietnam now ; and there perhaps lies the secret of what may yet become Peking's and Hanoi's greatest policy error with regard to Southeast Asia. In all likelihood both Asian Communist countries (and, for that matter, a great many Europeans, and notably Frenchmen) simply thought of the American effort as being, of course, somewhat larger and more modern than what the French had been doing ; but essentially of the same kind. Well, the truth is that the sheer magnitude of the American effort in Vietnam renders all such comparisons futile. The most striking example is of course the air war. Before Dien Bien Phu, the French Air Force had for all of Indochina (i.e., Cambodia, Laos, and North and South Vietnam) a total of 112 fighters and 68 bombers. On Sept. 24, 1965, the United States flew 167 bombers against North Vietnamese targets alone, dropping 235 tons of bombs and *simultaneously* flew 317 bomber sorties 'in country', dropping 270 tons of bombs (45).

The Americans had unleashed a 'modern' war, which had nothing to do with 'Trinquier's counterinsurgency' : 'Confidence in total material superiority now pervades all of the governmental machinery dealing with Vietnam', Fall wrote (46). This was not the war Fall had known or romanticised in *Hell in a Very Small Place* : '... [W]hat changed the character of the Vietnam war was *not* the decision to bomb NVN ; *not* the decision to use American ground troops in SVN ; but the decision to

(42) Robert McNAMARA, *Avec le recul : la tragédie du Vietnam et ses leçons*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1966, pp. 206-207.

(43) Bernard FALL, 'Vietnam Blitz : A Report on the Impersonal War', in *Reporting Vietnam*, volume I, pp. 175-186.

(44) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam', it's Spain', *Ramparts*, (1965), pp. 23-29.

(45) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam', *Current*, (December 1965), pp. 9-10.

(46) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam', p. 10.

wage unlimited aerial warfare inside the country at the price of literally pounding the place to bits' (47).

Fall did not want this. He called for negotiations before it was too late. He felt that the NLF 'must be treated as what it is — a political force in SVN which cannot be simply blasted off the surface of the earth with B52 saturation raids, or told to pack up and go into exile to NVN'. But 'it would indeed be a pity', he maintained 'if so much ingenuity, diplomacy, blood and treasure should have been spent on trying to persuade Hanoi to abandon the insurgent in South Vietnam without a solid attempt ever having been made at getting the insurgents to modify their relationship with Hanoi in return for a specifically South Vietnam solution that could be as honourable all around as it would be realistic'. It was too late and deep down he knew it.

Fall was a very angry man from this point. He was shocked by the 'depersonalisation' and the 'banalisation' of the war, of the unprecendented violence the air war was wreaking on the civil population. Close friends noticed that the change in the war had affected him emotionally as well, to the point he had trouble holding back tears when speaking of 'his Vietnam', and that his analysis of events was increasingly subjective (48). Fall, who had himself employed the French army's depersonalised vocabulary for the Viet Minh in his earlier books, began to criticise the American use of terms such as 'VC', 'Victor Charlie', or the 'the congs'. The Viet Cong is faceless, he lamented, without an identity in this war:

The impersonality (or depersonalisation) of the enemy merely reflects how this war is being fought. When one expects to destroy the opposition through massive use of firepower from afar, regardless whether it is from aircraft, artillery or naval turret guns, it becomes totally irrelevant to know who the leaders of the 'Liberation Front' are, or whether a given Vietcong unit commander is a local boy or from [sic] a North Vietnamese cadre (49).

Fall immediately criticised indiscriminate American bombing and the killing of innocent villagers. In one of his most powerful antiwar essays, *This isn't Munich, it's Spain*, Fall recounted his mind-bending trip on a bombing mission that raided a fishing village with a Skyraider loaded with around a thousand pounds of napalm bombs. He describes in detail how the planes raked the village three times with napalm and guns, followed by a 'scoring' of the dead and the indiscriminate release of an unexploded bomb before returning to the base (50). Shaken, he

(47) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam', p. 7.

(48) DEWILLERS, 'Bernard Fall', p. 157.

(49) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam'.

(50) FALL, 'This isn't Munich, it's Spain', pp. 23-29.

wrote: 'A truly staggering amount of civilians are getting killed or maimed in this war' (51). Fall saw what was happening as a 'moral problem'. He now condemned the American war, its 'needless brutality to combatants and civilians alike' (52). But like the leaders directing the war, he could not offer a cogent way out. And the desires of the Vietnamese communists, he admitted, remained unknown.

CONCLUSION

Bernard Fall died in February 1967, when he stepped on a land mine in Vietnam while accompanying a Marine patrol on a mission. He was only forty years old. In an amazing outpouring, America's leading newspapers, as well as smaller ones, lamented the tragic loss of such a unique and authoritative voice on Vietnam in America. On 1 March, the speaker of the House of Representatives gave the microphone and the floor to eleven congressmen who expressed one after the other their deep regret at the loss of such a great scholar and expert of Vietnam. Each expressed his admiration for the man, his books and his scholarship, revealing that they had at least read some Fall. Some had known him personally (53). Rarely do nations celebrate foreigners in their National Assemblies and in session. In an extraordinary gesture, Bernard Fall received this American honour in 1967.

The influence of this French intellectual on the American understanding of Vietnam and the wars for it was immense. He had and still has an astonishingly large American reading public. At the time, his publications and ideas circulated widely among Foreign Service Officers, scores of journalists, junior officers in the armed services, mid-level congressional and White House advisors, and some representatives in the US Congress (54). He reached the American public opinion in a clear and lively American prose, and this in the most influential newspapers and journals of the time. In 1983, the former advisor to Senator William Fulbright, Carl Marcy, explained that US policymakers knew little about the Far East and above all about Vietnam as things heated up around 1964. However, Marcy revealed that Bernard Fall used to stop in to the committee to speak on Vietnam every time he came back from Vietnam. 'Fulbright developed an admiration for Bernard Fall', Marcy

(51) FALL, 'This isn't Munich, it's Spain', p. 25.

(52) FALL, 'The War in Vietnam', p. 8.

(53) Roger Lévy, 'Bernard Fall devant le congrès américain', *Politique étrangère*, (March 1967), pp. 262-263.

(54) In 1998, the *Naval War College Review* re-issued Fall's 1965 article on 'The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency'.

said, [he] thought he was reliable' (55). Don Oberdorfer, a renowned reporter who covered Vietnam and knew Fall personally, has recently affirmed that 'it is no exaggeration to say that nearly all the American correspondents who covered the war stood on the shoulders of Bernard Fall in their acquaintance with the struggle and its history, and the same is true of many Foreign Service officers and at least the junior ranks of US military officers searching for explanations about a war they found hard to fathom' (56).

While Fall did not live long enough to have a direct impact on the antiwar movement – and given his style I am not sure he would have jumped on the antiwar bandwagon –, he sowed healthy scepticism and posed hard questions. Fall marched to his own drum, and always with an eye on the complexity of the issues. All of this made him a unique critical voice of the American war in Vietnam, one which helped open the way to critical questioning elsewhere, but perhaps less among the radical anti-war movement than within the civilian and military ranks themselves. It is quite clear, if we can believe General Powell, that a number of junior officers in Vietnam at the time continued to carry Fall with them.

From late 1965, Fall was just too wrapped up in Vietnam, especially as the American air war began in earnest. Fall was sad, emotional, depressed by the violence of the war unleashed on his 'old Vietnam' (his words). His former belief in the gallant soldier was certainly gone. Indeed, it is revealing that, when Fall appeared on *Celebrity's Choice* in 1966, he chose the song *What a Day for a Day Dream* to describe his Vietnam War. He selected the song, he explained with emphasis, because it 'was sort of sad ... wars are never, never pleasant things [...] You know, this is a war when you describe a very, very, very sad story of woe, people getting killed – the answer is going to be, 'sorry about that' (57).

QUATRIÈME PARTIE

Les tentatives de médiations européennes et les accords de Paris

(55) 'Carl M. Marcy, Chief of Staff, Foreign Relations Committee, 1955-1973', Interview #: Fulbright Breaks with Johnson', interview dated 19 October 1983, interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie, United States Senate Historical Office, Oral History Project, www.senate.gov.

(56) Don Oberdorfer in the preface to Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War*, p. 10.
(57) Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War*, p. 28.