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Lost cause

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Bernard Fall (right) in Vietnam, 21 February 1967. Photo: WikiCommons

Number One Realist: Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare

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When was the last year in which war in Vietnam could have been averted? 1964, when the US Congress approved the ‘Gulf of Tonkin’ Resolution? 1954, when the Geneva Accords ‘temporarily’ partitioned the country? 1945, when Ho Chi Minh and his comrades declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam? Any advances on 1945?

Bernard Fall was one of the earliest commentators to offer an answer. This new biography should be applauded for bringing his heroic life story to the attention of contemporary readers. Fall first arrived in Hanoi in May 1953, a time when French military commanders still believed they could crush the Vietnamese nationalist movement with firepower. This was just a year before the nationalist movement crushed the French military at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

It took Fall only a few days to work out that the military's confidence was misplaced. After a briefing about the network of 900 forts ostensibly controlling access to the Red River Delta, the huge area of flatlands stretching from Hanoi to the sea, Fall checked in at the tax office. There he found out that 'the bulk of the Delta was no longer paying taxes'. He then dropped by the education department, where he discovered that most of the region's schools had no government-appointed teachers. From these two pieces of evidence, he deduced that the colonial authorities had lost control of 70 per cent of the area inside the supposedly impregnable line of French forts.

Fall understood the importance of teachers and taxes because he had fought with the French resistance during the Second World War. In 1938, when he was just eleven, Fall's family had fled to France to escape the anti-Semitism of their native Vienna. It was only a temporary refuge: his mother was captured and later died in Auschwitz; his father was beaten to death by the Gestapo. Berthold Fall renamed himself 'Bernard' and, in late 1943, joined the *Maquis* in the mountains.

Fall learned the art of guerrilla warfare at first hand. He fought the occupying Germans: hitting, running and hiding. He discovered that discipline must be harsh to be effective and that propaganda is as important as fighting. Most importantly for his future career, he skilfully navigated the treacherous divide between resistance and collaboration. Some villages would support his band of brigands, others would betray it. Killing collaborators was a good way to prevent others collaborating. Destroying the structures of the occupying government created a situation of 'competitive control', encouraging and obliging the civilian population to give the guerrillas more support.

Towards the end of the war, Fall transferred to the French regular army. After discharge, the nineteen-year-old was hired as a researcher for the US team at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal. In 1950, he won a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Syracuse University. There, he wrote a master's thesis about the Nazi Party's subversion of German democracy and its seizure of power. He highlighted, in particular, the Nazis' physical intimidation of their socialist and communist rivals.

In mid-1952, he took a class on Indochina and his life changed. His next step was a PhD and that illuminating trip to Vietnam. His previous service with the French and US militaries opened doors that might have been closed to others, while his wartime experiences opened his eyes to things that the military could not see. Six months later, he wrote his first article on the situation, quoting a French civilian describing the war as 'militarily hopeless, politically a dead-end street and economically ruinous'.

But even this did not lead Fall to conclude that the effort was wasted. Fall was a European liberal, and he recognised the totalitarian tendencies of the Communist-led Viet Minh movement. He understood the use of physical intimidation to coerce political opponents into silence. He knew the importance of killing 'collaborators' to force others to fall into line. He analysed the Vietnamese Communists' Chinese-inspired land reform campaign in 1953 and estimated that 50,000 people categorised as landlords had been executed. More recent accounts put the number closer to 10,000, but Fall's overall point still stands.

Fall studied the history of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and learned that fighting between Vietnamese was under way even before the French authorities retook control of their colony following the surrender of Japan in August 1945. Cadres of the Indochina Communist Party had started assassinating their rivals in the liberal-nationalist Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang

and the left-wing Trotskyist parties in mid-1945. This was when the ‘Vietnam War’ had really begun.

Throughout the following decade, the Viet Minh practised what Fall came to call ‘revolutionary warfare’: the deliberate combination of fighting and political action. He recognised that the strength of the Communist side was the political preparation of the battlefield before the fighting started. The French, and later the US, thought military control was a precondition for political success, but Fall believed they were wrong. He made it his personal mission to try to persuade both armies to put more emphasis on political warfare.

As someone who had experienced the evils of fascism first-hand and analysed the evils of communism in practice, he argued for a steadfast liberalism. Fall believed that it would be possible to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of Vietnamese if the anti-communists and their supporters could offer a truly liberal and democratic alternative. In this he would be disappointed. By blocking and neutralising political reforms for decades, the French had destroyed the credibility of the Vietnamese non-communists long before.

Fall’s hopes for a non-communist future were never extinguished. As late as 1965, he called for two Vietnams, a southern ‘Republic’ and a northern ‘Democratic Republic’, to exist in parallel—just like the two Germanys and the two Koreas. He argued for his vision in the corridors of power and in the pages of newspapers. His fieldwork in the cities and paddy fields gave him immense authority. He wrote books and briefed generals, but all to no avail. While some supported his search for a ‘third way’, the two war machines kept rolling, with the Vietnamese population squeezed ever tighter in between.

That led Fall to argue that the US strategy was not only wrong but immoral. He compared its military operations in Vietnam to the fascist destruction of the Spanish town of Guernica in 1937. ‘What America should want to prove in Viet-Nam is that the Free World is “better”, not that it can kill people more efficiently,’ he argued. In the end, Fall himself was consumed by that conflict. In February 1967, he was killed by a Communist-planted improvised explosive device while accompanying US Marines on patrol.

This review has summarised Bernard Fall’s life in a few hundred words; Moir’s book takes a few hundred pages. He makes a point, immediately remakes it and then makes it again, all within the same paragraph. He then finds another way to say the same thing slightly further down the page. And makes it again a few pages later.

The author seems to think that his readers have the memory of a goldfish. He tells us that Fall was ‘a research analyst at Nuremberg’ on pages 13, 14, 21, 22, 28 and 30. And that’s just the introduction. After a ten-page account of Fall’s experiences at Nuremberg in Chapter One, he’s still introducing the fact that Fall was ‘a research analyst at Nuremberg’ on page 115: twice in the same paragraph! The reader could skip every other page and not miss a single nuance of the argument.

The book does, however, remind contemporary readers that alternatives to the way the French and US pursued their wars in Vietnam were available. It also suggests that, given the ideology and determination of the Communist side, there was very little that could have been done to change the outcome.

When, then, was the last year in which a Vietnam War could have been avoided? It was well before Bernard Fall arrived in Hanoi, well before the French hold on Indochina was shattered by

the Second World War, even before the mass demonstrations in Vietnamese cities that commemorated the death of the reformist campaigner Phan Chu Trinh in 1926 or those that protested the conviction of the radical agitator Pham Boi Chau in 1925.

I would argue for 1919. That was the year that Phan Chu Trinh and Ho Chi Minh petitioned the leaders at the Versailles Peace Conference for Vietnamese ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ and were summarily rejected. The French refusal to grant the peoples of Indochina the rights they promised to their own population destroyed the chances of a peaceful end to colonialism. The liberal road to independence was closed, and Ho Chi Minh began his journey towards communism.

Before 1919, a liberal strand of Vietnamese nationalism could have become dominant. Afterwards, it was discredited, and the political space was filled by communism. By the 1920s there were two irreconcilable currents of political opinion in Vietnam. There was, perhaps, no need for industrial-scale slaughter, but a future without fratricidal conflict was now impossible.



Bill Hayton is the author of *A Brief History of Vietnam*.