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12-20-2023

Book Review: Number One Realist: Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare

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NUMBER ONE REALIST



**BERNARD FALL AND VIETNAMESE
REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE**

NATHANIEL L. MOIR

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The Vietnam War remains America's most contentious war. Fifty years after the withdrawal of American troops, questions about why America fought there, whether the war could have been avoided, and what the lessons of Vietnam can teach America's military continue to be hotly debated, not least in the pages of *Number One Realist: Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare*. Written by former soldier and Afghanistan War veteran Nathaniel Moir, the intellectual biography of Bernard Fall examines the thinking of one of the most insightful writers of the Vietnam War and is clearly influenced by the biographer's service as a soldier in a rural counterinsurgency war some decades later.

Fall has long deserved a biography, and Moir has done the field of Vietnam War history a service by providing such a thorough treatment of Fall's important and fascinating life. Bernard Fall fled the Anschluss in Austria as a young man, fought for the French Resistance in World War II after his parents were killed by the Nazis, and worked at the Nürnberg war crimes tribunal to prosecute German weapons manufacturer Krupp for its use of slave labor during the war. He received a Fulbright scholarship to study in the United States, earned his doctorate at Syracuse University, and began studying the then-ongoing Vietnamese war against the French. Fall became one of the early analysts of the French campaign and maintained his focus on Vietnam during the early years of American

involvement, writing, among other books, *Street without Joy* (Stackpole Books, 1961) about Vietnam's National Route 1A, where he was later killed in 1967 by a Viet Cong land mine.

Fall's searing personal experience of World War II led to his initial studies of that conflict at Syracuse, but a class at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in the summer of 1952 introduced him to a different—and in some ways more complex—type of war. Fall's understanding of revolutionary war was impressive and influential, focusing on the political aspects as much as the military tactics. As he succinctly wrote in his article, "The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency" (*Naval War College Review*, 1965): "RW=G+P"—or "revolutionary warfare equals guerrilla warfare plus political action." In words that were echoed in the *Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (University of Chicago Press, 2007) 40 years later, Fall argued that "When a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered." Many of the best weapons for defeating an insurgency do not fire bullets but instead involve the application of political, economic, and diplomatic power supported by force or the threat of force. While Fall understood this old lesson well, the United States struggled with it in Vietnam and again in our most recent counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Fall's analysis was so valuable because he knew the frontline truth and understood the politics of the war. Senator J. William Fulbright was heavily influenced by his perspective, to little avail. Fall's thinking consistently led that of the United States about Vietnam—first that the French could win, then that they were doomed, then that the United States could win, and then that it was also destined to fail—with Fall always a couple years ahead of informed US public opinion.

At its 50th reunion the Yale class of 1973 hosted a panel on the Vietnam War. There was no consensus among the panelists about why the war was lost or whether it was ever winnable. There was, however, a general agreement that the members of the class who vigorously protested the American involvement in the war would never have expected that the T-shirts and baseball caps at their reunion would be made in Vietnam. History takes odd turns; studying it is the best path we have to improve our chances at a better future. *Number One Realist* is an impressive, important, and long-overdue book about one of our most important thinkers on the kind of war the United States does not want to fight but somehow ends up fighting repeatedly. Soldiers and scholars can better understand the capabilities needed to succeed in these kinds of wars by reading this book.

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022 • 376 pages • \$49.95

Keywords: Vietnam War, counterinsurgency, France, J. William Fulbright, Afghanistan

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