

POSTSCRIPT:

FIRST THOUGHTS ON THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE DEATH OF BERNARD FALL

Like many who came to political consciousness during the second world war, Bernard Fall possessed a sixth sense about political issues. But, in the case of Fall this sense was enriched by his seizing upon an active political role -- as a young guerrilla in the French Forces of the Interior. The French resistance produced a diverse group of post-war tendencies: careerists who entered government posts or the bureaucracy and parliamentary seats of the so-called Left in France, as well as some who maintained their principled independence. However, the latter phrased their opposition in terms of a politics of regret or disappointment -- misunderstanding the resistance to be a totally independent movement. The premises of such politics have been that the government has good intentions and is free to change its direction once the truth is presented to it. This has meant a search for dialogue with the 'Left' in the Surete and Foreign Legion, or in the CIA, State Department and Marines -- a dialogue with the officials who use revolutionary literature to give political meaning to their torturing, regroupment, napalming and extermination of the civilian population in the guerrilla conflicts with the Vietminh, the FLN in Algeria and the National Liberation Front of So. Vietnam.

The illusions of the resistance, especially the army as a revolutionary force, explain Fall's close ties to the military -- French and American. This tie brought him to the main world battle front -- Vietnam -- in 1953; and in the following year he wrote incisively about the significance of the Geneva Agreements. From that time he became the major, almost the sole, independent commentator in American periodicals about Vietnam. Yet, his view of such an

independent role was not to question the assumptions which were the foundation of the policies he analyzed.

Bernard Fall visited the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on several occasions; an unusual event for a scholar in America. His work on the DRV is according to the highest standards of contemporary professional political science: it is mechanical and his least valuable contribution. In South Vietnam, despite his anti-Communist and original pro-Diemist bias, or because of it, he was the earliest to realize that there was a renewal of popular insurgency. It was more with horror than hope that he described the evidence of the widespread popular support for the NLF. His negative or ambivalent attitude toward the NLF reflected his lack of comprehension of them. Familiar with Hanoi and Saigon, he never visited the liberated zones of South Vietnam, his information on the NLF (as his information on the Vietminh) came from printed materials, not observation and contact with the NLF leadership or rank-and-file. Do the requirements of professional academic standards -- travel grants from Nato, Seato or Asia Foundation, government-paid visiting professorships abroad, lectureships at the War College and the University strategy institutes -- preclude visiting and reporting about the single most important element in the Vietnam situation -- the popular insurgents?

Fall knew that the contemporary historian must confront contemporary events directly. But, he was drawn to confront contemporary events alongside the Foreign Legion and Marines, and not alongside the guerrillas. Although expressed in this manner, the crucial point is that Fall did have the courage to meet events directly, "to dare all, and then see." As a military historian, Fall would appreciate the analogy to the slogan of the wars of the French Revolution that in a revolutionary period every soldier carries a marshal's baton in his knapsack; the American public has awarded him a symbolic baton for the highest public service: independent criticism of government policy. Will his courageous confrontation with reality be an isolated event, or will scholars in America assume the tasks accepted by Fall and continue them in their logical direction whatever the consequences -- "to dare all, and then see"?