



# SMALL WARS <sup>(1)</sup>

## JOURNAL

### RETHINKING BERNARD FALL'S LEGACY. THE PERSISTENT RELEVANCE OF REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE (PART I)

#### Articles

#### **Rethinking Bernard Fall's Legacy. The Persistent Relevance of Revolutionary Warfare (Part I)**

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*SWJ interview with Nathaniel L. Moir, Ph.D., an Ernest May Postdoctoral Fellow in History and Policy at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School. Dr. Moir is completing a book manuscript on Bernard Fall for publication.*

**To what extent did his days in the French resistance provide a formative experience that enabled him to understand the forthcoming change in the character of war that the post WW2 world witnessed?**

There are two components to this answer.

The first concerns Fall's experience in the Maquis and second, his experience as a research analyst at the Nuremberg Trials between 1946 and 1948. As a member of the French Resistance, specifically, the Maquis in Haute Savoie, Fall had no real options but to join. Had he not joined, he almost certainly would have been conscripted for labor in Germany since a Vichy-Nazi decree called "Service for Obligatory Labor," issued in 1942, expanded to include Fall's 1926 birth year-group by late 1942.[i] Additionally, Fall was orphaned at the age of 16. He was an Austrian born Jew and after his family emigrated to France of the Anschluss of Austria, his mother was deported to Auschwitz after a raid on their home in southern France in 1942. In late 1943, Fall's father, Leo Fall, was murdered by the Gestapo because Leo was a suspected member of the Resistance. The core lessons Fall learned from this, and from his time in the Maquis centered on intense awareness of political and social distinctions among civil societies in times of war. Before his parents died, they had lived in Cannes where his family was denounced by a French Jewish Council because, as Austrian emigres, they were "Foreign Jews". This council betrayed their location to Vichy authorities who then conducted a raid on their home which led to Fall's mother's deportation to Drancy and then to Auschwitz. Fall's sensitivity to political and social difference infused his analysis of societies at war in Southeast Asia during the First and Second Indochina Wars and this

really made him almost an ethnographer of war. In the Maquis, Fall's awareness of the problem of collaboration only grew in importance and the issue of targeting collaborators was deadly serious during World War II before the Allied Invasion began in June 1944. Partisan warfare was violent but required accurate local intelligence, especially when targeting collaborators – killing the wrong individuals could turn an entire village against a group of Maquis so this kind of fine-grained intelligence that increased the effectiveness of the Maquis' effort really mattered in Fall's analysis of changes of warfare after World War II. He knew very well how, in Vietnam for example, that killing innocent villagers in Vietnam created grievances among surviving family members, and incited others to join or support the National Liberation Front. This is one of many key takeaways Fall's experience in World War II provides.

The second component to this answer complements the first because it highlights Fall's experience in the direct aftermath of World War II. Between 1946-1948, Fall served as a research analyst in the War Crimes Commission's tribunals of Nazi war crimes at the Nuremberg Tribunals. Fall's contribution to the prosecution of Nazi war criminals decisively added to and shaped his understanding of war and its consequences. His official title was "research analyst on the staff of the office of the Chief of Counsel for War Crimes" and he gained this position after working for the French delegation as a translator between April and September 1946. The specific case to which Fall was assigned was the case against the Krupp Corporation and its activity supporting and supplying the German Wehrmacht's rearmament programs.[<sup>ii</sup>] Bernard Fall worked with a specific focus researching the Krupp Corporation's conscription and exploitation of slave labor during World War II. The fact that, at the age of twenty, Bernard Fall physically attended the trials and contributed to their prosecution was remarkable. His field research in support of the trials was even more powerful as a foundation for his later scholarship. Very few young Jews whose parents were murdered by the Nazis could sit, as Fall did, only feet away from the docket containing Herman Göring, Rudolf Hess, Albert Speer, Fritz Sauckel, and other Nazi leaders, and witness their prosecution directly.

This experience was critical because it enabled Fall to develop a serious grasp of the 1907 Hague Convention and 1929 Geneva Conventions pertaining to law of war. As part of his research duties, Fall documented the progression of Treaty of Versailles violations through a thirty-six-page report entitled "Trois Rapports sur l'Armement et la Cavalerie du IIIe Reich" ("Three Reports on the Armament and Cavalry of the Third Reich"). In it, he focused on the illegal rearmament of Germany after World War I and the reestablishment of the German staff, a process that violated the Treaty of Versailles. [<sup>iii</sup>] Fall later built on this through graduate study at Syracuse University in 1952 where he completed a thesis called "The Keystone of the Arch: A Study of German Illegal Rearmament 1919-1936."

It should be no surprise for readers to recognize that when it came to his analysis of war in Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s, Fall already had a detailed and profound grasp of the Hague and Geneva Conventions and, more broadly, laws governing warfare.

**We usually frame counterinsurgency efforts in terms of competitions in governance/competitions for legitimacy. In his writings, Bernard Fall was emphasizing this trait of "establishing a competitive system of control over the population." How did he understand the essence of what he called - revolutionary warfare? In the end what was the RW - a strategy, a tactic, a method, a way of war?**

Revolutionary Warfare is not an archaic term that describes only wars of decolonization after World War II, or conflicts during the Cold War across the global south. Fall recognized that *it was an approach to conflict that could not be addressed solely through military force. Revolutionary Warfare was definitely not a tactic, it was more of a philosophy.* He was at his most succinct about this in a passage from his book, *Street Without Joy*. In a section called "The Future of Revolutionary War" he wrote, "the most important thing to understand is that guerrilla warfare is nothing but a tactical appendage of a far vaster political contest and that, no matter how expertly it is fought by competent and dedicated professionals, it cannot possibly make up for the absence of a political rationale." And then he provided what is perhaps my favorite quote that illustrates what he meant by differentiating Guerrilla Warfare and "Small War Tactics" from Revolutionary Warfare. He wrote, "A dead Special Forces sergeant is not spontaneously replaced by his own social environment. A dead revolutionary usually is."

For your *Small Wars Journal* readers who are seriously and often personally aware of what it takes to “make” a Special Forces soldier, this differentiation with a dead revolutionary and their comparative lack of training or equipment, at least during the wars of the 1950s and 1960s, is an important contrast. Fall was pointing out that revolutionaries were created by forces that generated revolutionary warfare – specifically serious political rationale that no amount of Special Operation skill could overcome or counter. In another instance, Fall wrote that “A US Marine can fly a helicopter better than any one else but he simply cannot indoctrinate peasants with an ideology worth fighting for.” The ideology matters less than the political rationale revolutionaries have for adopting whatever ideology they may choose. This is why Revolutionary Warfare as a philosophy can be taken up by Vietnamese communists as well as by Sunni insurgents.

At this time, the best thinkers on this overall concept of Revolutionary Warfare is, in my opinion, David Kilcullen as demonstrated in his books *The Accidental Guerrilla* and *Out of the Mountains*. The other best thinker developing this understanding of political rationale’s relationship to Revolutionary Warfare is U.S. Naval War College Professor, Craig Whiteside and the work he has produced in articles such as “The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare.” Whiteside observed that “the Viet Minh campaign against the French and their native forces in Indochina, which led to a strategic surprise and sudden collapse...is exactly what happened in Mosul and other areas of Sunni Iraq... the Islamic State slowly consolidated and patiently cultivated [Revolutionary Warfare] in a masterful, combined campaign of terror, assassination, limited conventional attacks, and the harnessing of tribal and public support.”<sup>[iv]</sup> This is significant because Whiteside’s scholarship explicitly demonstrates the relevance of Fall’s work as applied history useful for those thinking about and assessing warfare in our time.

Here's my last point as to how Fall’s influence has infused innovative thinking on Revolutionary Warfare because RW is increasingly prevalent in contemporary conflict, especially as information consistently gains in importance. Whiteside points out two current fallacies: the idea that the Cold War “heralded an end to ideological warfare, and the return of power and interest-based conflict now that the war of ideologies was over” is wrong. Second, that “The demise of revolutionary warfare turned out to be a fantasy.”<sup>[v]</sup> Events in Mosul and, more recently, Manbjji, Syria in January 2019, as well as scores of other attacks carried out by the Islamic State, demonstrate the cogency of Whiteside’s arguments. These attacks demonstrated “how throughout Iraq ISIS has focused with laserlike precision on killing ‘moktars,’ or village chiefs, as well as tribal elders and local politicians... ‘If ISIS can come to your town and kill the most important person in your town any night of the year, do you feel you’ve been liberated?’” New York Times Journalist Rukmini Callimachi reporting supports Whiteside’s analysis. In January 2019, Callimachi described how, ISIS “realized you don’t have to mount 6,000 attacks per month...you just have to kill the right 50 people each month.”<sup>[vi]</sup> This description almost directly parallels Bernard Fall’s descriptions of Revolutionary Warfare in Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The key issue here is that Fall also attempted to address a bigger problem: getting decision-makers let alone the general public to understand this form of warfare. And this problem is still with us. In Iraq and Syria, for example, Callimachi writes that “ISIS’ targeted assassinations drew little coverage in the international news media, and yet they have helped undercut the trust Iraqis place in their government’s ability to protect them – as well as drive young men back into ISIS’s fold.”<sup>[vii]</sup> ***ISIS may be eventually eliminated, but Revolutionary Warfare will not. Revolutionary Warfare is the connective thread that helps enable groups to adapt and is a key reason how AQI evolved into ISIS and how ISIS may likely evolve into something else.***

### **Did his conception on revolutionary warfare evolve over time? What role did the national historical grievances have in creating the fertile ecosystem for an RW?**

Fall’s conception of revolutionary warfare did evolve over time. “National Historical Grievances” in the case of Vietnam demands a great deal of unpacking but for simplicities sake, in Vietnam, the exploitation of the Vietnamese by the French since 1860 created a long list of grievances. Imperialism generally created so many serious problems that its legacy is still felt today in places such as the Middle East. In fact, one of the first ISIS videos I ever saw referred to the Sykes-Picot treaty of 1914. That should give your readers an indication of how prevalent and problematic colonialism was in World History and how it has a legacy that ISIS sought to dismantle by establishing its Caliphate that sought to erase borders created in 1914. In Fall’s case, he had a command as to how colonialism unfolded in Vietnam and, it is important

to point out, how the Vietnamese, especially ethnic Kinh, colonialized other ethnic groups in Laos, Cambodia and especially southern Vietnam. The Historian Christopher Goscha really builds on this idea as to how colonialism was not simply inflicted by white men upon the Third World but was and still is a human activity in general. Fall's thought on Revolutionary Warfare grew as he learned more and it became more expansive to include how it might operate in other contexts outside of Vietnam. This is why Fall's thought is very relevant to how we might better understand conflict today as Revolutionary Warfare. This is because *RW is driven entirely by political rationale, whereas, we all too often get hung up on tactics because, understandably, those are the things that kill soldiers.*

### **How did Bernard Fall conceive victory in RW? How would victory look like?**

At its most simple, the central means *to achieve victory in Revolutionary Warfare, in Fall's perspective, was to have a political rationale for military operations that appealed to greater numbers of individuals than the opposition.* Counterinsurgency, unfortunately, is all too often a collection of tactics that achieve nothing without a strategic rationale. On this point, the work of Gian Gentile changed my mind quite a bit over the course of the long COIN debate this last decade, but so did reading and re-reading Fall over many years. There are a few main points I would like to add, and these consist primarily of direct quotes from Fall on the idea of victory in Revolutionary War in the context of Vietnam and how it might have looked to him at the time. With these quotes, Fall's answers demonstrate how the value of his work really centers around its utility as Applied History so your readers will have to parse Fall's meaning for application to conflicts in which they specialize, may be preparing to deploy to, or, as students, are studying to achieve a better or more comprehensive understanding.

In terms of utilizing military might to achieve American strategic goals in Vietnam, Fall described this writing "I cannot say that I have found anyone who seems to have a clear idea of the end – of the 'war aims' – and if the end is not clearly defined, are we justified to use any means to attain it?"<sup>[viii]</sup> He added, "what changed the character of the Viet-Nam war was not the decision to bomb North Viet-Nam; not the decision to use American ground troops in South Viet-Nam; but the decision to wage unlimited aerial warfare inside the country at the price of literally pounding the place to bits."<sup>[ix]</sup> "What America should want to prove in Viet-Nam is that the Free World is 'better,' not that it can kill people more efficiently. If we could induce 100,000 Viet Cong to surrender to our side because our offers of social reform are better than those of the other side's, that would be victory. Hence, even a total military or technological defeat of the Viet Cong is going to be a partial defeat of our own purposes – a defeat of ourselves, by ourselves, as it were."<sup>[x]</sup>

In terms of Fall's thought on the reason behind Vietnamese communists' commitment,<sup>[xi]</sup> Fall told his friend François Sully, "Thanks to the RAND Corporation's field researchers, the US has by now a fairly good idea of why twenty thousand Vietcong turn themselves in to the government every year. What interests me, is to discover why the 260,000 Vietcong who do not defect continue the fight against considerable odds."<sup>[xii]</sup> Earlier, during the First Indochina War, also known as the French Indochina War, Fall wrote to his wife that anti-communist defectors "came because we have better food, medicine, and no French bombers to worry them. The Viet-Minh merely sheds its weak sisters on us."<sup>[xiii]</sup>

Last, Fall provided clear advice for soldiers, scholars, and policymakers developing or executing policy against Practitioners of Revolutionary Warfare. He wrote: "The most essential requirement of winning a revolutionary war is the courage to face the truth that the problem exists at all. This is harder than one thinks. There is always a tendency to camouflage the problem as 'banditry' or 'mob-action' – until one awakens one morning to find that the 'chief bandit' now sits in the President's chair in the capital and that the 'Mob' is defeating one's finest regular troops on a battle-field not exactly suited to their heavy equipment. To lie to others (and be found out) may simply be embarrassing. To lie to oneself about the terrifying possibilities of Revolutionary Warfare may well be fatal."<sup>[xiv]</sup> The most obvious point I can make here is that we need to find a way to achieve consensus on what constitutes the truth and whether we can agree as to what makes up a fact. The place we are now, and the fact that this is something debated in American society, would absolutely confound Fall. We have to do much better as a society to better enable and demand better from our government.

### **End Notes**

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