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Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare: A Missed Opportunity for Counterinsurgency Doctrine?

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The work of Bernard Fall converges with two contemporary events, one recent and one soon to commence. [Fredrik Logevall's spirited New York Times Op-Ed](#) reminded readers, on the fiftieth anniversary of Fall's death, that studying Fall merits the effort due to the persistent relevance of his prolific scholarship on matters pertaining to war. The second event scheduled for March 18 consists of the United States Army's Heritage and Education Center's roundtable, ["Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War,"](#) with Conrad Crane, David Petraeus, and current Secretary of Defense, James Mattis. At this event, the development, implementation, and legacy of the United States' Counterinsurgency doctrine provides the focus for a forum that deserves significant attention.

However, as shown in a memorable [War On the Rocks article](#), the legacy of the United States' Counterinsurgency doctrine includes a contentious foundation. Bernard Fall, in contrast with proponents of French military doctrine known as *la guerre révolutionnaire*, upon which key components of the United States' Counterinsurgency doctrine was based, provided a more circumspect corpus of work from which the United States' Counterinsurgency doctrine may potentially still benefit. Fundamentally, Bernard Fall believed that successful resolution of the Vietnam War could occur through negotiations informed by more judicious understanding of the cultural and historical realities of the Vietnamese Revolution, particularly in the construction of foreign policy related to Southeast Asia. The military-focused efforts Fall personally observed in Indochina – during his first research trip to Hanoi and much of Tonkin in 1953 - did not appear to work despite the superior military advantage of the French Army over the Viet-Minh. Fall's contention proved impossible to ignore after the decisive French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. As a result of the Viet-Minh victory, French proponents of *la guerre révolutionnaire* appropriated Viet-Minh tactics – tactics which had been successful against them – for France's growing conflict against the FLN in Algeria. Problematically, however, as the introduction to the United States Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24 makes clear, proponents of this doctrine, especially David Galula, provided a conceptual basis for FM 3-24 utilized in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Unlike proponents of *la guerre révolutionnaire*, Bernard Fall integrated sustained scholarship of historical developments and dynamic cultural transformations occurring in Indochina prior to, and during its revolution which commenced in August 1945. For example, he recognized that the Viet-Minh,

particularly in South Vietnam/Nam Ky after 1946, faced formidable opposition from Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen militias, but especially from the Cao Dai religious sect and significant numbers of non-communist nationalist factions as well. Fall's encapsulated this analysis of South Vietnam's diverse political-economy, and its religious diversity based on millennialism – in the case of the Hoa Hao for instance - in a 1955 Pacific Affairs article, **“The Political-Religious Sects of Vietnam.”** Fall concluded that Ngo Dinh Diem, the leader of the Republic of Vietnam, faced formidable opposition should he fail to adopt a pluralistic administration that accounted for the non-communist, political diversity of South Vietnam. As the contentious politics of nation-building in South Vietnam revealed between 1954 and 1963, Diem's and the United States' failures metastasized into the Second Indochina War.

While advocates of la guerre révolutionnaire, including Charles Lacheroy, Roger Trinquier, and David Galula, personally fought in Southeast Asia prior to 1954, they failed to integrate understanding of cultural and historical nuances of the Vietnamese Revolution – particularly in terms of what such history meant for Vietnamese - into their operational doctrines. As **Peter Paret** explained, theorists of la guerre révolutionnaire were not interested in “understanding the complex origins of the Indochinese War” but rather developed their theories to gain “insights that could be turned to operational use in other contexts,” primarily Algeria. This is understandable in the historical context of post-World War II French military culture. For proponent of la guerre révolutionnaire, according to **Etienne de Durand**, “their wars were taking place after the 1940 trauma and in a decolonization context: it was therefore very difficult for them to accept another defeat or to acknowledge the fact that the locals had legitimate grievances.” This resulted in French failure in Indochina because they were “unable to prevail in terms of legitimacy.” In sum, French advocates of la guerre révolutionnaire did not seek to organize a “competition in governance,” but instead underestimated the importance of governance as a fundamental component in modern warfare. On this point, Bernard Fall observed in his introduction to Roger Trinquier's 1961 publication, **Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency**, how these military thinkers warily grappled with the reassembling of France into the Fourth Republic. They did so, in Fall's view, in pejorative way embodied by the **Centurions described by Jean Lartéguy**

Peter Paret's insight additionally demonstrates that the greatest consequences associated with la guerre révolutionnaire consisted of its bearing upon the French Army's organizational culture, particularly after its failure in Indochina. Isabell Hull's, **Absolute Destruction**, draws attention to consequences associated with misappropriating historical lessons through misreading history. She notes that “organizational culture is liable to produce irrationality and dysfunction because the lessons of the past may be a poor guide to problems of the present, and because its most influential tenets are often unconscious, hidden, or taken for granted, and therefore difficult to correct. Nevertheless, organizational culture is more likely to determine action than is explicit policy or ideology.” Hull suggests such problems, not surprisingly, deleteriously affects one of the most important components of US military's organizational culture: how it uses history to learn. As a scholar who conducted numerous research trips to Vietnam between 1953 and 1967, Bernard Fall consistently contended that the United States' military - and its government's policies concerning Vietnam - pursued remarkably similar courses of action pertaining to its organizational culture as its French predecessors in Indochina. The adoption of key tenets of la guerre révolutionnaire for contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine – even if they are few and far between – are therefore worth revisiting, particularly if there is a reasonable possibility that better historical models exist.

As noted earlier, particularly after 2005, the United States reestablished its counterinsurgency doctrine in **Field Manual 3-24** and it looked to Galula's ideas, a now conspicuous thinker, as a guide. There is much to commend in turning to history for lessons of course, and it is well known that the prominent individuals scheduled to debate this topic at the United States Army's Heritage and Education Center possess well-deserved reputations as serious thinkers and important leaders. Still, unsustainable political resolution of

conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to raise the specter of la guerre révolutionnaire - informed warfare as a contentious subject worth reassessment, particularly as it relates to political legitimacy in an insurgency.

Fall addressed the subject of legitimacy on a consistent basis, and most prominently in his article, **“The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency.”** In one of the most succinct formulations Fall put forth, he noted “when a country is being subverted, it is not being outfought, it is being out-administered.” As the work of **David Kilcullen** amply demonstrates political legitimacy, and military efforts to achieve it, must ground counterinsurgency doctrine and practice. Even so, the challenges and hard work associated with continued development of viable, politically astute doctrine still requires continued engagement with history as it evolves. This is particularly true through training phases and especially in the implementation of doctrine as it confronts reality in places like Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere. With the ongoing development of **Train, Advise, and Assist Brigades** for the United States’ Army, considering perspectives such as Bernard Fall’s, therefore, is a positive step towards this end. In the meantime, the upcoming roundtable in Carlisle, Pennsylvania with Dr. Crane, General Petraeus, and SECDEF Mattis is an opportunity to find out how such developments may unfold.

In the context of the meeting in Carlisle, Bernard Fall fired an intellectual salvo worth keeping in mind. It critiqued intervention abroad in the name of liberal internationalism and, in many respects, prefigured critical debates pertaining to the **Blob**. In **The Viet-Nam Reader**, a literal handbook for anti-war activism published in 1965, Fall rolled up his perspective on the United States’ role in world succinctly and in a manner with resonance today: “In this world of nuclear weapons, irrational men, frightened nations, rampant technology, and permanent revolution, it is the foolish nation indeed which attempts to arrogate to itself the role of world policeman or moral arbiter without recourse to what others think, do, want or need.”

About the Author



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