

A Frenchman's Viewpoint

Bernard B. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu ("Great Battles of History," Hanson W. Baldwin, General Editor) (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1966). pp. 515 + xii \$8.95.

By Marvin E. Gettleman*

What does Bernard Fall mean when he tells us that "Only General Vo Nguyen Giap, in Hanoi, is truly qualified" to narrate the siege of Dien Bien Phu? Is it that since history is written mainly by the victors, the Chief of Staff of the People's Army of Vietnam is the appropriate chronicler of the 1954 victory of his forces in that fateful valley near the Laotian border? Does Fall imply that he himself will try to write the book that Giap never managed to do? He falls short of this aim, in this narrowly conceived, poorly written (yet exhaustively researched) study of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. (The account by Jules Roy, published in English in 1965, is far superior.)

No doubt it is this book we will turn to if we need to find out what French battalions and companies occupied just which of the strongpoints in the valley, or what sorts of girls were available for the French troops at the two mobile field bordellos at Dien Bien Phu. Fall has had access

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to documentation in Paris that no other scholar has used. Armed with this data, he demolishes such myths as the belief that Foreign Legion regiments were exclusively manned by Germans (though the "3/3" battalion was so composed). He also reveals hitherto unexplored facets of French strategy leading up to the battle. But while we are given ample explanation of the French defeat, we get little insight into what certainly was a Vietnamese victory. And that victory is what Giap would have written about, and indeed has written about in Dien Bien Phu (3d ed., Hanoi, 1964), which Fall dismisses as an inconsequential pamphlet.

Fall's approach to the military history of Vietnam in 1954 is narrowly confined to the French viewpoint. The "communists", as troops of the People's Army of Vietnam are consistently called, invariably lay down "murderous barages," attack "like hungry wolves," and fire "ferocious" artillery shells. The trenches of General Giap's forces are "communist trenches," their bullets are "communist bullets," roads under their control are "communist roads," etc. The adjective "Vietnamese" is reserved for the locally recruited troops fighting more or less half-heartedly on the French side. Contemporary usage in 1954 was different, and possibly more accurate. The French had no special word for their Vietnamese allies, but the enemy was universally called the "Viets." These Viet forces of General Giap called their countrymen who fought against them by the not unapt name, "puppets." Fall's departure from the terminology of 1954 brings no greater clarity to the events he narrates.

His pro-French bias is not only revealed in his choice of adjectives; it pervades the substance of his interpretations as well. When things go badly for the French garrison (almost every page!) the situations are described as "grim" and "tragic." French troops are credited with heroic feats; the Viets, never. Their bravery is pictured as fanaticism. Whereas too often historical works slight the losing side, here we have a book in which the winners are shadowy and obscure, their victory ultimately unexplained. Instead, Fall waveringly offers us a series of pseudo-explanations of the final denouement in early May. First we are told that the basic mistake was to garrison the valley in the first place without providing sufficient reserve forces. Again, using purely military reasoning, Fall ascribes the French defeat to inadequate artillery, and to failures in combat engineering. Yet other, more profound analyses constantly threaten to show through the dense fog of Fall's military prose. At one point he

concedes that there was something more to the war than military or strategic considerations. In another place Fall deplores the fact that the local population into whose midst a French garrison was introduced in late 1953 had not been prepared beforehand by proper political indoctrination. But here's the rub! Under what ideological guise could the French have masqueraded as anything but the reconquerers of their Indochinese empire?

It is ultimately his failure to come to grips with these political realities of the First Indochinese War that makes it difficult to apply Fall's insights to the current struggle in Vietnam, the Second Indochinese War. He is full of useful suggestions on how the French might have won the battle -- more efficient application of firepower, better methods of provisioning a garrison in every territory, and fuller use of aircraft. Fall candidly states that "... similar situations are likely to recur in other wars of this type." The promoters of such wars will do well to study Fall's book.

As for the rest of us, we may well ponder the words of a French paratroop commander at Dien Bien Phu, which Fall reports without comment. Col. Marcel Bigeard told Fall, ten years after the battle, "If you had given me 10,000 SS troops we'd have held out." The implication is that it will be necessary in the Indochinese wars of the present and future to send Storm Troopers of some sort into the fields against the insurgents. But what kind of a society produces Storm Troopers? What kind of movement generates a force that only Storm Troopers can suppress? Bernard Fall makes no attempt to answer these questions.