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On 28 September 1966, Professor Bernard B. Fall delivered a lecture at the Naval War College entitled "The History and Culture of Vietnam." A few months later, on 21 February 1967, Professor Fall was killed along "The Street without Joy" while accompanying U.S. Marine Corps units in the field in Vietnam. His last lecture at the Naval War College is reproduced here—as a memorial to his scholarship—on the anniversary of his death. It is an interesting interpretation of Vietnamese history which, in the eyes of Professor Fall, takes on the hue of a Greek tragedy. The reader should find it a useful perspective to the analysis of contemporary events in Southeast Asia.

THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF VIETNAM

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College

by

Professor Bernard B. Fall

When one examines the history of Vietnam, he is struck by its resemblance to a Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, and in some of Shakespeare's plays, it seems as though everyone is murdered or betrayed, the best of intentions fall by the wayside, and the entire plot eventually collapses in gloom and doom. The vicissitudes of Vietnamese history unfortunately bear a resemblance to these woeful tales.

It is important to gain a sense of proportion when discussing Vietnam. The country itself is about as large as Florida plus Massachusetts, and it contains almost as many ethnic and religious minority groups as these two states. One can perhaps better understand the war by transferring the operations there onto the map of Florida. When this is done it can be seen that the 3d Marine Division has taken a year to pacify an

area stretching from Miami Beach to Miami Airport.

This comparison may not be too optimistic, but it at least enables the reader to retain a sense of humility and realism about our accomplishments there. When one realizes that we are for the fifth time cleaning out the Seminole swamps and that the Seminoles have not surrendered after 120 years, he realizes the magnitude of the problem we are facing.

The people of Vietnam originally came from China. From 700 to 500 B.C. a Vietnamese Kingdom called Nang Yuch existed along the Yellow River in China. At the end of this period the Chinese, who originally came from Mongolia, pushed them southward. About 300 B.C. we find their kingdom again in the area around Canton and Hong Kong. Finally, in 275 B.C., they appear in the

Red River Delta. The Vietnamese thus have a Long March of their own to remember.

We know all of this from the written records of the Chinese. The wonderful thing about researching Chinese history is that the Chinese do write, and they have written for a long time. When the Angles and the Saxons were throwing rocks at each other in Europe, the Chinese were writing diplomatic notes.

What kind of people were the Vietnamese? We can at least guess intelligently about this by examining their language and its origins. The Vietnamese language today has a few Indonesian-Malay root words; it has a strong overlay of Chinese acquired, no doubt, during 1,000 years of Chinese occupation; and it also has a fair amount of linguistic body which is derived from the Thai ethnic group, which includes all of the peoples of Southeast Asia. Thus the Vietnamese of 300 B.C. were probably part of the Thai ethnic group, superimposed upon the Malays that formerly occupied the Red River area.

The French found a great deal of diplomatic correspondence between the early Vietnamese Kingdom and the Chinese Empire, some of it dating back to the period between 264 to 211 B.C. Much of it is perfectly readable today. The earliest example of such correspondence is a letter from the Empress Lu of China to Trien Da, the ruler of the Vietnamese Kingdom in the Red River Delta. Trien Da was a Chinese deserter and soldier of fortune who migrated south and managed to become the ruler of the Vietnamese Kingdom.

In this letter the Empress noted that Trien Da had recently declared himself an emperor and inquired as to the reason for this step, which compromised her status in the area. Trien Da replied that two of his viceroys had declared themselves kings, thus making it necessary for him to assume a loftier title. A compromise was therefore arranged by which Trien Da would assume the title

of emperor for internal usage but retain the title of king for diplomatic correspondence. This interesting exchange accounts for the fact that many medieval foreign writings on Vietnam seem to use the titles of king and emperor interchangeably when referring to the ruler of Vietnam. It also reveals some of the problems of being a small country contiguous to a very large one.

In 111 B.C. there occurred an important event in Vietnamese history. In that year the Chinese invaded Vietnam and subjugated it. That occupation was not to end for 1,049 years. At the time the population of China was perhaps 50 million, while that of Vietnam was something in the nature of half a million. You can readily imagine what 1,000 years of Chinese occupation did to Vietnamese culture. To be brief, we do not even know what the original Vietnamese looked like. We think they probably looked like the Malays, but this is strictly an extrapolation. Chinese irrigation methods, language, writing, and architecture became part of Vietnamese culture. About the only thing the Vietnamese retained was the feeling of belonging to an entity called Vietnam, which they carried throughout the years of Chinese occupation.

There were several rebellions during this millennium of foreign rule. In A.D. 47 the sisters Trung rebelled against the Chinese, somewhat in the fashion of a Joan of Arc team, and won an initial victory, only to be defeated in the end. In A.D. 247 another rebellion was suppressed. Finally, in A.D. 938, when the Chinese were involved in a civil war at home, the Vietnamese were successful. While they did succeed in evicting the occupying forces, the Vietnamese consented to paying a nominal tribute to the Chinese to preclude recurring efforts on the part of the Chinese to reestablish their authority. Thus the French in 1885 did not feel fully in possession of Vietnam until the Chinese relinquished their tribute.

After 300 years of relatively unfettered independence, the Vietnamese were forced to contend with an invasion by the Mongols. We still cannot understand how a nation of probably less than a million people could get on their ponies and conquer an empire that extended from the Pacific to Breslau, Poland, but they did. They conquered China, the Middle East, India, Russia, and Poland. They were not only excellent horsemen but excellent seamen as well. They invented a type of landing craft which had two lateral trapdoors for discharging cavalry, and they used them in an unsuccessful attempt to invade Japan.

The Mongols, being the victims of naval piracy on the part of the Champas Empire in what is today South Vietnam, attempted to conquer the Vietnamese Kingdom as a preliminary to dealing with the Chams. In A.D. 1270 they invaded Vietnam in their landing craft and defeated the Vietnamese in a standing battle.

A Vietnamese general, Tran Hung Dao, continued the resistance. He retreated to the mountains and began a guerrilla campaign against the Mongols, which prevented them from ever holding the area securely. Tran Hung Dao also wrote a guerrilla warfare manual which makes interesting reading today, although it has never been translated into English. After the Mongols had contended with Dao's harassment campaign for 9 years and increased their forces in the area to half a million men (including both Mongols and native levies), they began to lose patience.

At this point Tran Hung Dao let it be known that he planned to make a stand against the Mongols in the lowlands of the Red River, and they quickly came up that river in their landing craft to surround and destroy him. As the tide receded, however, huge iron-tipped stakes appeared in the water and restricted the movement of the Mongol vessels. The Vietnamese then used fire

arrows to panic the Mongol horses in the confined spaces of the landing craft, and, as a result, the Mongols were completely defeated. This battle was known as Bach Dang, and, of course, the other side is harking back to it today. As the result of it, Vietnam was saved from Mongol occupation.

During the years following their successful defense against the Mongols, the Vietnamese began to expand southward. They did so not by military means, but by relocating and subdividing their cell-like village units. The first victims of this expansion were the Chams. The Chams were a people of Indonesian origin who made their living entirely by seaborne raiding. In many respects they were the Norsemen of Southeast Asia. Their settlements were strictly coastal, with virtually no agriculture.

The Vietnamese migrated southward and occupied Champa from the land side. They obtained permission from the Chams to till the fields in the hinterland of the Champas territory. Their holdings continually expanded until by the 15th century only a few isolated coastal settlements remained of the once powerful Champa Empire. Today the only knowledge we have of them comes from accounts by Chinese travelers and the few Champas villages remaining.

The territory which is today South Vietnam was then also occupied by Cambodians, who at one time controlled an empire which included South Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand, Burma, and Laos. While they were still liquidating Champa, the Vietnamese were also colonizing Cambodian territory. In 1698 Saigon, which was originally a Cambodian town, fell to the Vietnamese, almost a hundred years after Jamestown became English. The Ca Mau peninsula at the southernmost tip of South Vietnam fell to the Vietnamese in 1757, 20 years before the Revolutionary War. By the end of the 18th century the Vietnamese had expanded into present-day Cambodia, and by 1860

Cambodia had completely disappeared, partitioned between the Vietnamese and the Thais. Since that time Cambodia has walked a fine line in her foreign relations. When I was a visiting professor in Cambodia in 1961-62, a friend of mine compared his country to Poland. "Whenever the Russians and the Germans get together, the Poles have had it. It's the same with us; whenever the Thais and the Vietnamese are on the same side of an alliance, we're dead ducks."

The territorial expansion which attended this Vietnamese migration also brought to the fore one of that people's traditional political characteristics--constant internal division. When the Vietnamese are relatively devoid of major foreign enemies, they usually manage to have a major civil war at home. From 1600 to 1800 Vietnam was divided into a northern state and a southern state, with a wall called the Dong Hoi separating the two along the 20th parallel. This wall is still in place today. In the 1780's an internal rebellion developed in the southern half of the kingdom, and this rebellion served as the pretext for the first French intervention in Vietnam. This sounds like something you have heard before.

This internal rebellion is known to history as the Tay-Son Rebellion. A group of local reformers revolted against their conservative king, promising relief from the practices of the landlords. The Tay-Son seized the capital and killed all of the royal family except for one prince, Quang Yang, and his 6-year-old son, Nguyen Anh. This prince took refuge in a French mission, where he offered to Louis XVI large territorial concessions in return for assistance in defeating the Tay-Sons.

A French bishop went to France with the prince's son to bring Louis XVI word of the offer. Unfortunately he arrived in the year 1789, and Louis XVI had other things to worry about besides acquiring property in Southeast Asia.

The bishop and the little prince thus left emptyhanded. On the way back to Vietnam, however, they stopped at an Indian trading station, Pondicherry, and recruited there a private army of mercenaries who were willing to help Quang Yang in return for the territorial concessions he had promised the King of France. Thus in 1789 Vietnam got its first military assistance advisory group--300 volunteers, two corvettes, and a few artillery pieces.

This small force trained a native Vietnamese army in European tactics and the use of European weapons. This force, plus the fact that the Tay-Sons were now involved in a war with the northern Vietnamese kingdom and had failed to deliver on the promised reforms, was enough to restore the authority of the prince. The French bishop died in the course of the fighting, but three of his companions stayed in Vietnam permanently.

One of the more interesting results of this French presence in Vietnam was the construction of several star-shaped forts of the Vauban type. It is amazing that these men could have that kind of a cultural impact in such a short time, but they did. The fact that they did reveals a great deal about the Vietnamese. Their culture is dependent to a great degree upon foreign imports--the Imperial Palace in Hue is a small copy of the Peking summer palace enclosed in a larger copy of a French fort--yet, despite this, the people never lose their feeling of belonging to an entity called Vietnam.

Nguyen Anh, the son of Quang Yang, turned out to be the George Washington and Napoleon I of Vietnam. He completed the defeat of the Tay-Son in the south and then proceeded to conquer the north and reunite the entire country. He was crowned as Emperor Gia-Long in 1802, and he was confirmed in that position by the court in Peking, which granted him recognition and the imperial flag that went with it. Gia-Long

established a new law code for Vietnam, which is a mixture of local custom, Confucianism, and French law.

Gia-Long's son and grandson were apparently not impressed with their predecessor's European experience, for they became total isolationists upon assuming power. This isolationism included an attempt to expel or kill all Christians, who were growing in number in Vietnam. Between 1827 and 1847, 130,000 Catholics were murdered, including several bishops.

This persecution of Christians brought about the first recorded direct contact between the U.S. Government and Vietnam. In 1847 the French bishop in Danang, Monsignor Lefebvre, was about to be executed by the Vietnamese Emperor. An English merchant ship in the harbor carried word of this to the nearest Western warship, which happened to be the U.S.S. *Constitution*, then on a cruise in Far Eastern waters, commanded by Capt. John (Mad Jack) Percival. Percival sent ashore a contingent of marines who freed the bishop and brought him aboard the *Constitution*. The bishop insisted upon being placed ashore farther south in Saigon, where he was promptly rearrested by the Vietnamese. The second time a French vessel rescued him.

As I am sure you are aware, the persecution of native Christians was a favorite pretext in the 19th century for a European nation to engage in a colonial operation. They would come in to rescue the Christians and would stay to rescue what goods there were to be had. Thus a French fleet, assisted by a Spanish contingent from the Philippines, entered Vietnamese waters in 1856 and within 4 years had occupied the southern third of the country.

The remainder of Vietnam was more thickly populated and hence more difficult to occupy and administer. Nevertheless, by 1874 the French had occupied central Vietnam. The French colonial administration was divided on the

desirability of proceeding northward and completing the occupation of Vietnam, for it appeared at that time that the returns of such an occupation would not be equal to the costs of administration. Such was not the case in the south, where rubber plantations and rice crops quickly provided the margin of profit.

In the early 1870's a French merchant in Hanoi was about to be executed for his somewhat irregular business practices. A young officer, Lt. (jg.) Francis Gagnier, went ashore with 25 marines to apologize to the Vietnamese and retrieve the merchant and his family. Unfortunately, his force was insufficient for the task, and he and his marine complement were massacred. France's national sense of honor being what it was, and is, a much larger force was despatched to pacify the area. The Vietnamese King and the nobility fled into the jungle and continued to resist, supported by the Chinese. In 1884-85 the French fought a war with China, occupied the Pescadores, and forced the Chinese to forego their nominal sovereignty over Vietnam. The Vietnamese continued their resistance alone for a time, but their emperor was at last captured and deported to France's safest colony, Algeria, where he died. The French were thus left at last in uncontested control.

The French colonial administration of Vietnam is a long story in itself. It was not as bad as some of its ultraliberal detractors have pictured it and certainly not as good as some of the more idealistic Frenchmen thought it was. Hanoi Medical University was opened in 1904, which is as early as any Western university in Asia. The native intellectuals quickly absorbed French language and culture and became involved in the local administration. They also rose quite freely in the ranks of the French military.

Despite the fact that the Vietnamese very readily absorbed French culture, they by no means lost their national

identity. When I was preparing my doctoral thesis in 1953 I had occasion to interview the head of the Viet Minh underground in France. I brought along with me for the interview an interpreter, as my Vietnamese is not very understandable. I was surprised to discover that the man I was interviewing, a Vietnamese, could speak only French. On another occasion, in the student demonstrations in Hanoi in 1953 against the French occupation, the students carried banners saying in French, "Down with French imperialism. Frenchmen, get out." I remember sitting with a French colonel who remarked that the Vietnamese were at least insulting his country in excellent French.

This remains just as true today as it was in the course of the French colonial occupation. I recently discovered, while receiving additional instruction in the Vietnamese language, that in recent years, as it has become necessary to add technical terms to that language, the North Vietnamese have adopted terms of Russian or French origin while the South Vietnamese have chosen terms of Chinese origin. This is doubtless a conscious effort to avoid becoming too closely attached to either China or the United States, respectively.

From 1885 to 1940 the French were virtually unchallenged in their possession of Vietnam. In World War I they managed to obtain the services of native troops to aid in manning the Western Front. In World War II, however, the circumstances were entirely different. As soon as France was defeated in June of 1940, the Japanese began to demand access to Haiphong and the Yunnan Railroad, which would provide them with an additional route through which they could attack the Nationalists. The French sent a mission to Washington in July of 1940, which asked U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull for U.S. assistance in resisting the Japanese pressure. The reply was negative, and in

September of 1940 the Japanese invaded Indochina, defeating the French in a place called Dong Dang. A Chicago newspaper carried at that time the headline, "Who wants to die for dear old Dong Dang," which expressed perfectly the isolationist mood of the country.

With the French liquidated militarily, U.S. intelligence began looking for a reliable source of information inside Vietnam. The only one available was the Communist Intelligence network, managed by Ho Chi Minh, who operated his organization from a headquarters in Nationalist China. Ho agreed not only to provide our OSS with information, but also to rescue downed pilots in Vietnam.

When V-J Day came in 1945, Ho's small force was the only group in Vietnam capable of taking advantage of the situation. After seizing the arms of the surrendering Japanese and securing the abdication of the Emperor Bao Dai, Ho formed a government which included the chief Catholic Bishop of the country, Monsignor Lehouout, and Bao Dai himself as an adviser. On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh stood on the rostrum of the National Theater in Hanoi to proclaim the independence of the Republic of Vietnam.

Rather than attempting to return to Vietnam immediately by brute force of arms, the French sought someone who could undercut Ho Chi Minh's appeal and yet be amenable to their control. Their search led them to a former emperor, Duy Tan, who was both an electronics engineer and a major in the French Foreign Legion. He had been deported from Vietnam in 1917 after leading an unsuccessful revolt against French rule. They now encouraged him to return to Vietnam and attempt to organize a government, but, unfortunately for their plans, he was killed en route in an air crash. It is unfortunate that the Vietnamese never had a chance to choose.

While Ho Chi Minh was proclaiming his government, the Allies were occupying all of the former Japanese possessions, including Indochina. The British occupied the territory north to the 16th parallel, and the Chinese Nationalists occupied the remainder. The French were at first left out entirely, due to their own pressing problems at home. In March of 1946, however, they began to displace the British. The Chinese Nationalists, who transported to China in the interval everything of value which could be moved, were at first not inclined to yield to the French. Within the ranks of Ho's government there immediately arose the question of whether it should support the French in demanding the withdrawal of the Nationalists or attempt to use the Nationalists to oust the French. In the decisive conference on this matter, Ho Chi Minh himself decided the issue with the comment, "I'd rather smell French dung for 5 years than Chinese dung for the rest of my life." The Nationalists withdrew, and the contest for Vietnam narrowed to one between the French and the Viet Minh underground.

In late 1946 there was still hope that the French and the Viet Minh could

settle their differences without a war. But on both sides the moderate leaders were outflanked by their own radicals. General Giap convinced Ho Chi Minh that a military solution was necessary if Vietnam was to maintain its independence. In France, President Leon Blum, a friend of Ho's, sent a delegation to Indochina to resolve the problem peacefully. His good intentions were undermined by the French colonial administration, which sidetracked his personal correspondence with Ho Chi Minh.

On 14 December 1946, fighting broke out in Vietnam, and it has not yet ended. Vietnam's Greek tragedy still continues, but we can at least hope that there will be light in the morning.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

A professor of international relations at Howard University, Bernard B. Fall was respected for his scholarship on Southeast Asia. He was born in Vienna in 1926 and raised in France. He became a member of the French resistance in 1942 at the age of 16, and after the war he and his family settled in the United States. His books include *Street without Joy*, *Viet-Nam Witness*, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, *Last Reflections on a War*, and *Anatomy of a Crisis*.



Dr. Bernard Fall with "C" Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines the day before being killed by a booby trap (DoD photo by Sgt. Burch).