Editor's Note: 7 May 2024 marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam. The battle marked the end of the First Indochina War between France and the Vietnamese forces of the Vietminh. In commemoration of this event Les Belles Lettres has reissued a French translation of Bernard Fall’s classic study of the battle, *Hell in a Very Small Place*.

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Isabelle sat isolated to the southeast, approximately two kilometers from the main garrison force at Dien Bien Phu. Isabelle, a main subordinate position called “strongpoint Wieme” defended by T’ai tribesmen and led by a young French Lieutenant, Réginald Wieme, held on until 6 May 1954. That day, according to Bernard Fall, “Isabelle disappeared under a permanent cloud of exploding mud.” In a final bombardment that targeted the primary fortification of Dien Bien Phu, Isabelle fell. Like the many other strongholds and airfields onto which the French troops fixed their hope for survival, the finality of the siege of Dien Bien Phu was sealed by the Vietnamese Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, the Viet-Minh, on 7 May 1954. In reflecting on what was a critical battle in twentieth-century world history, one of the few survivors described the defense of Isabelle as “hell in a very small place.”\footnote{Bernard B. Fall, \textit{Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu} (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1967), 292.}

This \textit{Les Belles Lettres} edition is the first French translation of Bernard B. Fall’s greatest scholastic accomplishment. As a pathbreaking book exploring a militarily and politically significant battle, it is one of the most influential books in the field of twentieth-century military history. Along with an earlier book Fall wrote, \textit{Street Without Joy} (1961), \textit{Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu}, which was originally published in 1966, stands out among the thousands of books on the wars for Indochina.\footnote{Fall, \textit{Street Without Joy} (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1961); Fall, \textit{Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu} (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966).} For scholars writing about France’s war in Indochina between 1946–1954, it is well-known that Fall’s life experiences and his academic skills uniquely positioned him to become the foremost scholar on war in Indochina. To better understand Bernard Fall’s account of Dien Bien Phu, it is useful to know more about him.

Born in 1926, Bernard B. Fall was born in Vienna to an Austrian Jewish family. Shortly after the Anschluss in 1938, his family emigrated to southern France. In the early stages of World War II, his family was denounced by a French Jewish council, and his mother was deported first to Drancy and then to Auschwitz, where she perished in 1942. Fall’s father joined the French resistance but was captured and then killed by the Nazis in November 1943. At the age of seventeen, Fall and his younger sister, Lisette, were orphaned. In turn, Lisette found refuge at the Convent de Clarisse, at the top of Cimiez in Nice. In Bernard’s case and according to his \textit{Forces Françaises De L’Intérieur} (FFI) Identification card, he joined the secret organization in October 1943 even though he had already been active in numerous anti-Nazi groups as early as 8 November 1942, not long after his mother’s deportation.

Through World War II, Fall served with numerous resistance groups. In late 1942, he joined a Maquis group in Haut-Savoie; by 1943 and as a member of the 2e Bureau FFI, he engaged in combat with Nazi forces in Chindrieux. That same year, he fought behind German lines at Col de La Madeliene, at the village of Aiguebelle, in Maurienne, and elsewhere in the French Alps during liberation in 1944. Due to his native knowledge of German and his fluency in French, and aided by his experience in tactical warfare, Fall excelled as an interrogator and guide for elements of Jedburgh Teams who coordinated Allied and Resistance efforts in 1944. By September 1944, Fall was integrated into the regular French Army and was assigned to the Sixty-Ninth African Artillery Regiment of the 4th Moroccan Mountain Division.\footnote{Dorothy Fall, \textit{Memories of a Soldier-Scholar} (Washington D. C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 30. Dorothy Fall, Bernard’s wife, contributed significant detail about this early period of Fall’s life in her excellent memoir. With few exceptions, Bernard Fall rarely described his life experiences in his own scholarship. The only other insightful document known by this author that provides extensive detail about Fall’s personal life, is found in François Sully’s papers. Sully was a long-time friend of Fall’s, and they shared many similar life experiences. See François Sully Papers, “Sully comments on Bernard Fall,” Newsweek Files, Feb-March 1967, Series II, Subject Files, Box 2, Folder 31.} These early experiences of war
powerfully shaped Fall’s views on guerrilla warfare in ways that contributed to how he understood and wrote about warfare in other and new theaters.

After World War II, Fall worked for the Office of the Chief Counsel at the Nuremberg Tribunals. Initially serving as an interpreter during the International Military Tribunal, he later transitioned to become a research analyst during the second stage of the Nuremberg Tribunals, the Nuremberg Military Tribunal, whose prosecutor was American Brigadier General Telford Taylor. In this role, Fall conducted field research throughout Germany, including a study of how the Krupp Corporation, led by Alfred Krupp, pillaged French factories and brutalized slave laborers—particularly women and children from Eastern Europe—who were forced to work in Krupp’s armaments and munition factories across Germany. This field research greatly aided the prosecution’s case against Krupp. From this early moment in his career, Fall began to acquire a razor-sharp comprehension of International Law as it related to the conduct and rules of war. Long before he became an expert on Indochina, Fall's knowledge about the law of warfare was extensive and based on a long and deep understanding of conflict during World War II. Among Fall’s earliest academic work was a project titled “The Keystone of the Arch: A Study of German Illegal Rearmament, 1919–1936,” which later formed the basis for a Master of Arts degree he completed in the United States as an early Fulbright Scholar in 1952.

At this time, in 1952, Fall’s attention turned increasingly to France’s war in Indochina. In 1953, he spent over ten months traveling across Indochina, visiting every province in Vietnam and numerous other locations in Laos and Cambodia. During these pivotal ten months in 1953, Fall relied on his credentials as a French citizen and on a network of World War II veteran contacts who helped him with logistics, such as transportation, food, and access to join military operations as an observer. The material he gathered in Indochina in 1953 provided him with the base material for his most influential books, Street Without Joy and Hell In A Very Small Place, to which he committed subsequent years to writing.

Fall’s first book, however, focused entirely on the formation of the Vietnamese Communist government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). This book, The Viet-Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was completed in 1954 and first published in 1956. In the book, Fall described the origins of the Viet-Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (the Viet-Minh), their effort to form a government, the earliest stages of war with the French in 1946 and 1947, and the DRV’s economics and taxation systems, agricultural policies and agrarian reform, constitutional structure, and almost every other element of this struggling new Communist government. The content of Fall’s book provides extensive and granular detail about the DRV’s history that was not matched until 2013 when David G. Marr published Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution. In 1960, The Viet-Minh Regime was translated into French under the title, Le Viet-Minh: La Republique Democratique du Viet-Nam, 1945–1950, with the veteran scholar Paul Mus providing the preface.
The English version of The Viet-Minh Regime formed the basis for his Doctorate in International Relations that he completed at Syracuse University in 1955. Fall then embarked on a scholarly career at Howard University, where he earned the rank of full professor as the Ralph Bunch Chair in International Relations.

From his personal and academic base in Washington DC, Fall wrote a total of five major books, several edited collections, hundreds of articles, book reviews, and numerous commentaries in every media format of his day. In 1964, Fall composed the introduction for Roger Trinquier’s Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought the work of both Trinquier and David Galula to the attention of American soldiers fighting a counterinsurgency that challenged the might of the US military in profound ways. As it related to the battle of Dien Bien Phu, it is worthwhile to note that Trinquier was among the Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés (GCMA) personnel who formed Operation Condor, the planned rescue attempt of the garrison at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

At the age of 39 in 1966, Fall won the George Polk Journalism Award for interpretive reporting and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Together, these capped numerous other major fellowships he had won in previous years. Most importantly, Fall cultivated relationships with leaders, such as the French ambassador to the United States, Charles Lucet, US senator and chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, William J. Fulbright, and numerous other high-ranking military officers. Throughout all these years of prolific scholarship, Fall consistently wrote about France’s war in Indochina. His goal of writing the most comprehensive and detailed account of Dien Bien Phu, Hell in A Very Small Place, was met with the publication of the book in December 1966, the very month when he started his last trip to Vietnam.

Tragically, the “Street Without Joy,” which is a stretch of Route 1 from Huế to Quảng Trị, in Thua Thien Province north of Hue, is where Fall died on 21 February 1967, at the age of 40. While on a patrol with 1st Battalion, 9th US Marine Regiment, Fall and a United States Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant, Byron Highland, tripped a landmine in a rice paddy dike. Fall, like his French compatriots he wrote about and with whom he had served as a member of the Maquis, the FFI, and the French army, bravely faced war and wrote about it with intensity. The progression of his life was immensely rich, and his personal experiences paralleled many momentous events in world history. His life centered on helping others to understand Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare and he spent his professional life investigating ways through which to mitigate the kinds of horrific conflict in the twentieth century that destroyed so much of the world he knew as a young man. As a scholar of the First and Second Indochina Wars, Fall left copious scholarship that deserves continued examination. This book, in which he charts the battle day-by-day, is a key means through which to understand the battle of Dien Bien Phu and this pivotal event in world history.

Contributors:

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One Realist—Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare (Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2022). He is currently working on a book provisionally titled, “Corresponding Conflicts: A Comparative History of the Korean and First Indochina Wars.”
Review by Fredrik Logevall, Harvard University

It is one of the great military engagements of modern times: the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, waged with ferocity over a period of eight weeks in May 1954 in the remote northwestern part of Vietnam, between French Union forces and those of the Viet Minh. It began with a coordinated Viet Minh assault on the heavily fortified French base on 13 March and ended in the early evening of 7 May, as the last French Union unit waved the white flag. No other battle during the First Indochina War witnessed this level of ferocity; indeed, no other war of decolonization during the twentieth century reached the same degree of violence witnessed on this valley floor during these weeks. With the 70th anniversary of the battle now upon us, it is appropriate that Paris publisher Les Belles Lettres is bringing out a new French-language edition of Bernard Fall’s classic 1966 work on the battle, Hell in a Very Small Place (Dien Bien Phu: Un coin d’Enfer). Ably translated by Michel Carrière, this edition also includes an incisive foreword by Nathaniel Moir, the author of an important recent study of Fall and his writings.1

Fall did not have deep training as a scholar of Southeast Asia, but it would be hard to overstate his influence on American thinking about Indochina in the mid and late 1960s—and for a long time thereafter. When he was killed on 21 February 1967, while accompanying US Marines on a mission near Hue in South Vietnam, he left behind an impressive body of work on the war: six books and well over a hundred articles, including in publications such as the New York Times Magazine, The Washington Post, Foreign Affairs, Newsweek, The Saturday Evening Post, and the New Republic, as well as academic journals. In the years preceding his death, he was a regular on television news shows, including on Meet the Press in late January 1965, just as President Lyndon Johnson prepared to massively increase the American presence in Vietnam. To the question of whether US vital interests were at stake in Indochina, Fall replied: “I would say American interests are involved. Whether vital or not, I don’t think so.”2

Among a sizable subsection of American officers in Southeast Asia, Fall’s books were required reading. Colin Powell, who served as two tours in Vietnam, and who would go on to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and then secretary of state, recalled in a television interview: “We all read Bernard Fall as part of our training. . . . We probably all should have studied Bernard Fall a lot longer and with greater intensity, especially people in high policy positions, because he made it clear and we should have realized that it was a war as much about nationalism and self-determination within this one country than it as about the ideology of communism or the worldwide Communist conspiracy.”3 Lt. Col. Harold Moore, a battalion commander who took part in the battle at Ia Drang in late 1965, writes in his celebrated memoir, We Were Soldiers Once…and Young, that he read Fall’s book Street Without Joy en route to Southeast Asia earlier in the year. In early 1968, when it seemed that US forces might be in for their own version of Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh, officers scrambled to get their hands on Hell in a Very Small Place.4

Even the man at the top, William Westmoreland, the US commanding general, remarked in his memoir that among the books on his bedside table in his Saigon villa were several by Bernard Fall. Which did not mean he necessarily picked them up: “I was usually too tired in late evening to give the books more than occasional attention.”5

1 Nathaniel L. Moir, Number One Realist: Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare (London: Hurst, 2021).
2 A transcript is in box F01, Bernard Fall Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston MA.
Fall’s treatment of Dien Bien Phu is not perfect, and some elements have been superseded by subsequent scholarship. At times, the level of detail threatens to overwhelm. He is better on the reasons for the French defeat in the battle than in explaining the Viet Minh’s victory, and he misses the degree to which both sides, not just the French, suffered morale problems. The French officers and men in his story (who, it should be noted, constituted no more than 30 percent of French Union forces, the rest being Legionnaires, Africans, Tài, and Vietnamese) come alive on the page as flesh-and-blood characters in a way the mostly faceless “Communist” attackers never do. Also missing in the book is the recognition that the Viet Minh triumph at Dien Bien Phu came at the cost of extremely high casualties. As research by the historian Christopher Goscha has shown, the Viet Minh experienced a stunning killed-in-action rate of 32 percent during the first-wave attack in March—that is to say, one out of three Viet Minh troops who went over the top in the initial assault did not return. In the later waves the death rate dipped, but it always stayed above 20 percent. Among the wounded, the evidence shows, almost a quarter (23.7 percent) suffered injuries to the head or neck. Many, it goes without saying, never recovered, even if they lived.\(^6\)

Still, the book retains its hold. Like no author before him—or, arguably, since—Fall brings the battle to life. With clean, unadorned prose he takes us through the key developments, from the decision by French commander Henri Navarre in late 1953 to accept battle (shockingly misguided in hindsight, less so at the time) to the dramatic finale on 7 May 1954, when the French garrison fell. We learn a great deal about the performance of the French intelligence services, and of the strategy and tactics employed by the warring sides. (A major theme is the failure of the French high command to understand the operational environment.) In the heart of the narrative, Fall provides an almost day-by-day account of the preparations for battle—as the Viet Minh surround and besiege the garrison—and of the subsequent fighting, until at last the guns fall silent on 7 May. Even then, the drama was not over, as many surviving French Union troops now were forced to endure exhausting and terrifying marches through the dense jungle to prison camps far away.

Here is his description, vivid and evocative, of the scene on the morning of 5 April, following brutal fighting at one of the French strongpoints, Huguette:

A 10 h 15, enfin maîtres d’«Huguette 6», Clédic et les autres officiers contemplent le champ de bataille autour d’eux. 800 cadavres vietminh, dont un grand nombre de jeunes gens de seize ans et moins, s’entassent à l’intérieur des ouvrages dévastés du point d’appui. Ils en comptent 300 autres dans les barbelés et les champs de mines qui entourent la position: en se retirant, l’ennemi a bien dû en enlever au moins autant. Vingt et un survivants, tous très jeunes et tremblants de saïsissement, sont découverts parmi les cadavres et envoyés au camp de prisonniers que Dien Bien Phu entretient toujours en son centre (363).\(^7\)

Not the least of the book’s virtues is Fall’s empathy toward the people on all sides in the battle, and his refusal to present a facile drama of heroes and villains. He condemns various aspects of French strategy and tactics yet maintains an affinity for his fellow Frenchmen, especially the mid-level officers making tough no-win calls inside the steadily shrinking perimeter. His abiding anti-Communism does not prevent him from expressing regard for the grim and intelligence with which Ho Chi Minh and his subordinates, including General Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander at Dien Bien Phu, wage their campaign. He understands why not all Vietnamese are prepared to join Ho’s cause, and he admires the fighting spirit of the Legionnaires defending the garrison.

Could things have ended differently? Yes and no, Fall concludes. Massive American airstrikes likely would have brought the destruction of Giap’s main force divisions and thereby saved the garrison, but it would not

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\(^7\) The figure of 800 would appear to be a typo in the present edition; in Fall’s original version it is 500.
have brought France victory in the larger war. The overall balance of strength would still have tilted in favor of the Viet Minh. The extent of the deterioration in the countryside made the reestablishment of French control a farfetched prospect at best, not merely in the north but throughout Vietnam. In the south, the security situation in the spring and summer of 1954 was deteriorating fast, while in the all-important Red River Delta in the north the outlook was grim and getting grimmer.\(^8\)

A final point. At various points in this remarkable book, we catch glimpses of what is characteristic of all of Barnard Fall’s publications in the period: his deep understanding of French counterinsurgency (or “pacification”) efforts in Indochina in the early 1950s and their clear relevance for what the Americans were seeking to achieve at decade later, at the very time he was writing the book. The military dimension of course mattered a good deal, he informed his readers time and again in these writings, but ultimately it is politics that is paramount. “[W]e must not forget that this is a revolutionary war, that is, a military operation with heavy political overtones,” he wrote to Newsweek’s François Sully in 1962. “To win the military battle but lose the political war could well become the US fate in Vietnam…. A US Marine can fly a helicopter better than anyone else, but he simply cannot indoctrinate peasants with an ideology worth fighting for.”\(^9\)

It was a message that American leaders ignored at great cost—to themselves and, infinitely more, to the people of Vietnam. Fall concludes his book with the arrival of American warplanes over Dien Bien Phu, on 2 July 1965, eleven years, one month, and twenty-six days after the French surrender:

> En moins d’un quart d’heure, les avions américains lâchèrent 29 tonnes de bombes de 350 kilos, de roquettes de 70 mm et de missiles air-sol Bullpup. Comme onze ans plus tôt, la D.C.A. ennemie était importante. Mais aucun avion ennemi ne se montra et tous les appareils américains rentrèrent à leur base. Les pilotes qui remplirent cette mission signalèrent que le temps était très beau, en ce jour d’été, sur la vallée (684).

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There exist illuminating book titles that genuinely reflect their content, but few so accurately depict the struggles of battle as well as Bernard Fall’s *Hell in A Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu.*1 In a well-respected previous book, *Street Without Joy,* Fall provided a gripping narrative of key events during the First Indochina War.2 *La rue sans joie* referenced what French soldiers called the area around Route 1 in Thua Thien Province north of Hue. The incessant battles that occurred there between 1947 and 1954, and their relevance for the eventual battle at Dien Bien Phu, tragically did not end with the defeat of the French fortress in May 1954. As Fall knew, the tragedy of France’s war in Indochina bled over into America’s war in Vietnam. His life’s work, at its core, centered around working to inform Americans and their leaders as to how “Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare” functioned and how French operations had failed to defeat it. Dien Bien Phu served both as an end to France’s war and as a historical analogy for what the United States faced in 1967 and 1968 at Khe Sanh.

From the perspective of American Marines and political leaders, the battle at Dien Bien Phu precisely evoked the outcome they sought to avoid at Khe Sanh. The alarming North Vietnamese attack on the remote garrison at Khe Sanh led US President Lyndon B. Johnson to exclaim in 1967, “I don’t want any damn Dien Bien Phu!”3 Johnson, who had studied France’s efforts in a similar situation in 1954 as the Senate minority leader, had no reservations about calling for large-scale US bombing of North Vietnamese positions in 1967 and 1968. The circumstances facing the French in 1954, when fears of large-scale Chinese intervention in Indochina dominated, did not apply to Johnson’s thinking when it came to the later battles at Khe Sanh.

In an early approach of applied history, scholar Yuen Foong Khong provided an authoritative analysis of analogies related to Dien Bien Phu.4 Through this comparison of Dien Bien Phu with other conflicts, Khong provides significant insights into policy decisionmaking during the Korean War and the Indochina War. He also incorporates useful and interesting assessments of how policymakers process information and how this occurred in the case of decisionmaking related to Dien Bien Phu. Khong’s chapter on France’s efforts reveals how Dien Bien Phu continues to provide compelling reasons for why it should be studied.

The power of Dien Bien Phu as an analogy might be expanded even further because the battle embodied how a twentieth-century military defeat could determine the political outcome of a conflict. Even though French forces at Dien Bien Phu only constituted approximately four percent of France’s total military force in Indochina, their defeat at Dien Bien Phu, “was the end of the French adventure in Indochina and, indeed, the end of the French Empire.”5 For the Vietnamese forces, the Viet Minh victory approached the mythical status of Austerlitz for Napoleon’s Grande Armée, or, perhaps more appropriately, the mythical status of Waterloo for the Seventh Coalition armies. For the embittered French Dien Bien Phu represented an exceptional event in the early Cold War. In Fall’s perspective, “only at Dien Bien Phu was a colonial power recently defeated on the open field of battle by the subject nation” (460).

Unlike France, the United States was able to avoid a “Dien Bien Phu” at Khe Sanh and continued to increase B-52 bombing attacks against North Vietnamese positions in late 1967 and into 1968. To be sure, the siege at

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Khe Sanh evolved into a political victory for the Viet Minh because of its strategic relationship to the Tet Offensive in 1968. The North Vietnamese near-pyrrhic victory during the Tet Offensive might have been unlikely without the ghosts of Dien Bien Phu lurking in the conscience of Johnson and other Americans.

Dien Bien Phu, more than anything during America’s war in Vietnam, had a monumentally close relationship to the Korean War. As Fall wrote in chapter IX, “Vulture, Condor, and Albatross,” “in American foreign policy, the fates of Korea and Indochina were considered as intimately linked from the date of the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 to the end of the Truman administration in January 1953” (293-94). The connections between these conflicts were a central reason why Fall expended considerable effort developing a comparative analysis of Korea and Indochina. As it turned out in May 1954, the Geneva Conference that year, which resolved France’s war in Indochina, was originally convened to resolve the Korean War.

Prominent scholars who write about Dien Bien Phu, have also discussed *Hell in A Very Small Place*. Martin Windrow, whose book *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* exceeded even Fall’s large book in its page count, was succinct about the source of his inspiration; he writes, “My interest in Dien Bien Phu was sparked more than 30 years ago when I was enthralled by Bernard Fall’s classic *Hell In a Very Small Place.*” Windrow adds, “As an exciting account of battle drawing upon the testimony of survivors it could hardly be bettered.” Windrow usefully examined the historical context of the battle with information that only decades of research long after the war ended could afford. Ted Morgan notes how he met Fall and the American journalist David Halberstam in Paris in 1966, shortly after Fall’s book was published. Morgan, however, took a more popular and straightforward approach in his book about Dien Bien Phu.

In one of the most recent academic accounts of Dien Bien Phu, Kevin Boylan and Luc Olivier observe,

> Fall’s book was the first full-length study on the subject in English and quickly became the standard Western account of Dien Bien Phu. As a result, his conclusions about Giap’s artillery strength have gained wide acceptance and have been incorporated into the prevailing Western narrative about the siege. And for several decades it was nearly impossible to challenge that narrative because Vietnamese publications offered few details about the Vietnamese People’s Army’s order of battle and weaponry at Dien Bien Phu.

Boylan and Olivier’s excellent study fill a gap by utilizing Vietnamese records that were not available until the 1980s when the Doi Moi era of economic reform in Vietnam began. Their work is valuable because of their access to records from both sides that accurately assess the expenditure of ammunition during the battle, thereby providing an accounting of the amount of Chinese military supplies and personnel that were available to support the Viet-Minh.

What then, were the sources Fall used in his pathbreaking study and how did he compose this vast work of literature? In the preface to *Hell in A Very Small Place*, Fall transparently recounts the full details behind his

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7. The subject of connections between conflict in Indochina and Korea is a current research focus for this author.
research. The preface and the detailed appendices, which describe the French and Vietnamese Order of Battle, provide a comprehensive overview of Fall’s sources and methodology.

The origin of Fall’s book began when the author Hanson Baldwin requested that Fall write a book about Dien Bien Phu for Hanson’s “Great Battle Series.”12 In 1963, Fall traveled to Paris to begin research in the newly released files on Dien Bien Phu held at the Service Historique de l’Armée. To conduct this research, he received authorization from Pierre Messmer, the French minister of the Armed Forces, who provided him with unparalleled access to files and other material related to Dien Bien Phu.13 That summer, Fall and his family traveled to Algiers, where he interviewed Algerian officers who had fought in the battle. In May 1964, he returned to France to conduct more interviews and research. The detailed appendices and bibliography demonstrate the extent of the resources he gathered on the battle. In addition to this primary-source material, Fall also benefited from the work of other scholars, such as Jules Roy, whose La Bataille de Dien Bien Phu relied on interviews with Major General René Cogny, and Major Jean Pouget, who was the author of Nous étions à Dien Bien Phu.14

In 1963 and 1964, Fall was also notably conducting a genuine battle for his health. As early as 1961, he suffered uremic poisoning which was the beginning of further serious kidney problems. In June 1964, he was a patient at George Washington Hospital where he had his left kidney removed. Later, in 1965, he also began to have problems with his colon and developed a condition called retroperitoneal fibrosis.15 When Fall composed Hell in A Very Small Place he experienced serious health issues; this makes his accomplishment the more remarkable. Through all of this, Fall endured, preserved, and delivered one of the best books of military history in any language. In late 1966, Fall completed his magnum opus. He dedicated it to his wife, Dorothy, writing: “To Dorothy, who lived with the ghost of Dien Bien Phu for three long years”16

Les Belles Lettres’ new publication of Dien Bien Phu provides hundreds of pages of graphic, horrific, poignant, and sometimes even amusing details of the battle, along with analysis, maps, photos, and the gripping personal stories of the people who were there. Dien Bien Phu combined the worst elements of twentieth-century combat: hand-to-hand fighting in Viet Minh-dug trenches that echoes World War I trench-raiding; incredible numbers of wounded soldiers fighting without limbs; waves of infantry attacking well-defended positions; and an aerial war in which French Air Force pilots risked their lives to supply the base. On the other side, Vietnamese sacrifice and violence was no different. The reader will learn about Chinese-supplied and Viet Minh-crewed air defense units that mostly prevented logistical supplies from reaching French forces. Fall also describes secretive rescue plans, such as Operation Condor, which was supported by Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés (GCMA) and T’ai units hacking through the jungle to relieve the garrison.

Fall also presents geopolitically complex strategic operations, using his unique ability to shift from tactical accounts to strategic analysis. This was especially evident in Fall’s sobering account of Operation Vulture. On 3 April 1954, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and US chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, US Navy Admiral Arthur Radford, prepared to discuss the top-secret plan with a bipartisan group of Congress and President Eisenhower.17 Operation Vulture, which Fall describes in detail, consisted of a massive aerial

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12 See, for example, Hanson Baldwin, Battles Lost and Won: Great Campaigns of World War II (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
13 Dorothy Fall, Memories of a Soldier-Scholar (Washington D. C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 182. Also, see Fall’s Preface to Hell In A Very Small Place for a detailed his account of the sources he consulted.
16 Dedication page in B. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, vi.
17 Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place, 300. Fall’s full account of Operation Vulture is available on pages 299-314 in the edition referenced in this footnote.
bombardment that B-29 Superfortresses would inflict on Viet Minh positions, never materialized. The most remarkable element of Operation Vulture was that it included the contingent deployment of tactical atomic weapons, should the alternative of conventional saturation bombing Viet Minh positions fail.\footnote{For a detailed analysis of Operation Vulture, see George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” The Journal of American History, 71:2 (September 1984), 343-363.} In a day and age when nuclear saber-rattling continues, it is depressing to know of American plans to inflict a tactical atomic attack after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no matter how remote Dien Bien Phu may have been.

Operation Vulture was a complex operation and in its most extreme version consisted of deploying two atomic bombs against Viet-Minh positions in the hills surrounding the Dien Bien Phu Valley. According to the plan provided by Admiral Radford, US aircraft would be transported from the US aircraft carriers USS Essex and USS Boxer, to supplement two air wings located at Okinawa and another at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Fall writes, “Otherwise, the overall plan was simple enough: the two wings from Okinawa and the one from Clark would rendezvous east of the Laotian capital of Vientiane, head for their target; and exit from Indochina via the Gulf of Tonkin” (308.) Radford, Vice President Richard Nixon, and Secretary Dulles presented this plan, Operation Vulture, to French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault on 14 April 1954. Fall reports that “Bidault was said to have replied that the use of such bombs would destroy the garrison as well as the Viet-Minh, and General (Paul) Ely, though denying the use of A-bombs had ever been seriously considered, nonetheless spoke of the presence of the nuclear deterrent represented by the aircraft carriers of the Seventh Fleet in the Gulf of Tonkin” (307). Among American officials, Army chief of staff, General Matthew Ridgway was “dead set against the whole idea”(311).

The subject of tactical nuclear arms employed in conventional battle is a dark shadow that lingers from Dien Bien Phu up to the present conflict in Ukraine. Except for tremendous scholarship by George Herring and Richard Immerman on the subject, Fall’s account of Operation Vulture is the most prominent, and almost certainly the earliest, of this most excessive potential but unrealized application of military power to relieve French allied forces at Dien Bien Phu.\footnote{The most prominent analysis of Operation Vulture is. Herring and. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu,” 343-363.} Viet Minh-crewed and Chinese-supplied flak units were one factor in preventing any large aerial attack, whether conventional or atomic.\footnote{The Epilogue to Hell in a Very Small Place includes considerable analysis on French and US failures leading to France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Another example of Fall’s analysis includes considerable attention given to China’s People’s Liberation Army’s Anti-Aircraft capabilities that assisted the Viet-Minh in reducing French and US air supply efforts and denied US close air support to the beleaguered French positions.} The fact that such an “atomic” plan was developed so close in time to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, remains a critical feature of Fall’s book that deserves close reading. In evaluating Operation Vulture, Fall reminds readers:

> It is perhaps immaterial at this point whether such a use of atomic weapons around Dien Bien Phu was feasible or even desirable—and this writer, for one, on the basis of his personal research, is certain that their use had been seriously considered at one point or another by the military planners involved—but the fact remains that even British Foreign Secretary [Anthony] Eden seems to have been persuaded that the use of such weapons was note entirely ruled out and that the weapons were readily available for use.\footnote{Bernard B. Fall, Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1966), 307.}

In the non-nuclear context, the fate of the French, Algerian, Moroccan, Senegalese, and Vietnamese soldiers who fought for France remains at the core of Fall’s often heart rending narrative. Almost certainly because Fall himself had served in the Maquis, FFI, and had been awarded la Médaille de la France Libérée for his service
to France during World War II, the sacrifice of soldiers at Dien Bien Phu mattered a great deal to him. Long after 1954, Fall remained emotionally and intellectually connected to French veterans through the Washington DC branch of Les Anciens Combattants Français. In a manner, like his close friend and fellow journalist, François Sully, Fall saw the valor and total commitment of French, Cambodian, Algerian, Senegalese, and Vietnamese fighting for the French principle of liberty. This, in Fall’s view, was valuable beyond measure and often difficult to describe; actions spoke more than words when it came to such values.

Ultimately, even though there were, and remain, transcendent elements of the battle at Dien Bien Phu, it marked a distinct geopolitical change in world affairs. France’s role in the world, and the way the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operated, changed how European countries and the United States engaged the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the early stages of the Cold War. While George Kennan’s concept of containment was introduced as early as 1947, the Communist victory in China and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949—along with its support for North Korean aggression in 1950—created a cascade of problems for France’s efforts in Indochina. Operation Vulture, as Fall and others suggested, was not implemented because it was feared that a vast aerial escalation—particularly should atomic bombs be deployed—would turn the Indochina war into something much worse.

Even though only approximately four percent of France’s total forces in Indochina were in combat at Dien Bien Phu, the long-simmering “weariness of French public opinion at home,” and “French and Vietnamese combat morale,” were factors that contributed to France’s withdrawal from Indochina (343). However, the withdrawal from Indochina was contested. Even as the 1954 Geneva Conference sought to resolve both the Korean War and the war between France and the Viet-Minh—and before French forces entered into serious combat against the Front National Liberation (FLN) in Algeria by September 1954—French forces continued to engage in hard-fought battles with the Viet Minh. The battle at Mang Yang Pass, also known as An Khé, in June 1954, marked the bitter defeat of Groupement Mobile (G.M.) No. 100, a regiment-sized mobile task force and “one of the best and heaviest of its type.” References to Dien Bien Phu in the chapter titled “End of a Task Force” in Street Without Joy, and throughout almost all of Fall’s many books, indicate the degree to which Dien Bien Phu haunted Fall. As he indicated to Dorothy, Dien Bien Phu created ghosts with whom he lived for the years he spent researching and writing. Dorothy, along with their daughters, also lived with those ghosts. But Fall gave a voice to those who were lost during the horrible battle of Dien Bien Phu, and Hell in A Very Small Place still recognizes those lost voices in war.

While the soldiers who are described in Hell in A Very Small Place are far from perfect, what is not beyond question is that those French and French allied soldiers who parachuted in to assist their brothers in arms demonstrated a commitment to fulfilling their duties—even at the cost of their lives in what was quickly recognized as a futile effort near the end of the siege. This proven demonstration of valor was as worthy as it was tragic. Fall’s determination to explain and describe the pathos of fighting against oppression and authoritarianism was linked to the events of his own life. His fine-edged sense of justice almost certainly had a foundation in his childhood and through the loss of his parents to the Nazi war machine (440).

Hell in A Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu recounts the end of the French Empire and, particularly, the end of France’s control over Indochina. It details how the Democratic Republic of Vietnam defeated

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22 On Sully, see Moir, “To Each His Turn...Today Yours, Tomorrow Mine: François Sully’s Turn in History,” The Journal Of American-East Asian Relation, 30 (2023) 274-309.
24 This was a description Fall gave to this unit in his chapter, “End of a Task Force,” in Street Without Joy, 185.
25 For further background, see Moir, Number One Realist.
France and its powerful military. Many French soldiers fought with conviction and Fall is careful to describe the immense sacrifice and devotion with which French Union troops fought at Dien Bien Phu and throughout Indochina. Their counterparts—with the aid of Soviet and Chinese military supplies but without the aid of an air force at the time—nonetheless defeated the great Western power of France. Fall, in the final pages of the book, explains the thinking of General Henri E. Navarre. Fall notes that Navarre “said of his army that ‘they were good and devoted men, but they were not exactly the soldiers of the French Revolution’” (440). Fall describes how a senior French officer in a Viet Minh prison camp was overheard to say, “we were fighting for our professional honor and in the end, for our skins. But they, the enemy, were fighting for their country” (440).

The battle of Dien Bien Phu reveals the fanaticism required of a people using the multi-leveled techniques of revolutionary warfare—in the Maoist sense but adapted to Vietnam—to fight for their independence from a foreign power. The tens of thousands of Vietnamese porters carrying supplies to support the tens of thousands of soldiers fighting in the remote valley of Dien Bien Phu embodied revolutionary warfare for which there was no adequate French military power to counter. In the closing pages of his book, Fall describes how this was a lesson that was shocking to the “staunchly Catholic and conservative junior officers of the French Army” (440). These very officers, as Fall knew, later formed the backbone of the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS).

As far as they were concerned, their whole world, the whole code by which they had lived and fought, had crashed about them on the blood-soaked hills of Dien Bien Phu. They had fought as best they how. They were at least as well trained and far better equipped than their Communist counterparts. Yet, they had lost. When everything was said and done, it remained a fact that the anti-communist Vietnamese simply had not fought like the Vietnamese on the Communist side. The non-Communist guerrilla forces in the hills around Dien Bien Phu had not succeeded in cutting off or interfering with the Viet-Minh supply lines, as they were to have done. Even the French troops, though they had fought honorably in many cases, had not—with the exception of the paratroop battalions—fought with the fanaticism of the enemy (440).

The US efforts in Vietnam from 1965 to 1975 indicate that no adequate American military power to counter Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare was found in the decade after Dien Bien Phu. A core value found in Fall’s scholarship is his ability to communicate how and why revolutionary warfare functions. His life as a fighter in the French Resistance, as a scholar studying Maoist-inspired Vietnamese revolutionary warfare from the earliest stages of his career, and his own almost fanatical commitment to understanding revolutionary warfare provided him with the understanding he needed to accomplish his goal of explaining how the weak might defeat the powerful. Hell in A Very Small Place is the culmination of his efforts toward teaching that powerful lesson.

This book is history at its finest and is one of the great accounts of war, courage, battle, atrocity, and loyalty written in the twentieth century. It is a justly deserved classic of military history. As a work of literature, Fall’s descriptions of those individual efforts transcend the time and place of the war in Indochina. The virtues and failures described might just as easily be found in Victor Hugo’s writing, or in that of Alexandre Dumas. Fall’s analysis of Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare is a subject that demonstrates a transcendent quality and is a key factor that explains why his writing remains relevant. Fall’s writing evokes the consequences of hubris that empires create—as demonstrated by all nationalities and all ethnicities—and this is because both hubris and empire are the work of humans. In the case of Dien Bien Phu, this remote valley created for the French,
as Victor Hugo wrote, a place where “on était vaincu par sa conquête.” This is a lesson which people in power, in their quests to dominate others, have yet to learn.

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26 Victor Hugo “L’expiation,” (Paris, Dreyfous, 1879); online at https://www.poetica.fr/poeme-7187/victor-hugo-expiation/ (last accessed May 1, 2024)