

Appeasing the Spirits Along the ‘Highway of Horror’: Civic Life in Wartime Republic of Vietnam

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During the Easter Offensive hundreds of Republic of Vietnam soldiers and civilians were killed while fleeing Quảng Trị city along Highway One, earning this stretch of the road the name ‘the Highway of Horrors’ [*Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng*]. This article examines this understudied event and the efforts of ordinary people, particularly the staff of the daily newspaper *Sóng Thần*, to collect and bury the corpses left on the highway. In focusing on this humanitarian endeavour, it highlights the spiritual consequences of mass death, people’s agency in countering the violence of the Vietnam War, and the dynamism of South Vietnam’s civil society.

KEYWORDS Vietnam War, Easter Offensive, civil society in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), civilian death, massacre.

On 1 July 1972 during the Easter Offensive two Vietnamese journalists, Ngy Thanh and Đoàn Kế Tường, used a heavily damaged railway bridge to cross the Bến Đá River, which bisects Highway One between the cities of Quảng Trị and Huế. What met them on the other side was a scene of carnage: many hundreds of civilian and military personnel corpses littered the highway, the result of an attack two months earlier. Their article and Ngy Thanh’s photographs published in a daily newspaper, *Sóng Thần* [tsunami], helped to christen this 10-km stretch of road ‘the Highway of Horror’ (*Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng*).¹ Based on a variety of sources—newspapers, published personal accounts, and interviews—this article examines the attack along Highway One of late April and early May, 1972. It also focuses on the humanitarian endeavour led by *Sóng Thần* daily newspaper to recover and bury the victims. Concerned about the large number of unburied bodies along the highway, the staff at *Sóng Thần* mobilized donations and volunteers to provide proper burials for the victims. Their work was undertaken for the spiritual well-being of not only the dead, but also their families and the surrounding community.

¹ According to Trùng Dương when Ngy Thanh first reported the news of the killing, he used the term, the Highway of Horror. ‘Đi nhặt xác đồng bào Q. Trị trên đường “Kinh Hoàng,”’ *Sóng Thần*, 11 July 1972, pp. 1 & 3.

As a grassroots endeavour relying on volunteers, this project affords useful insights into the Republic of Vietnam's (RVN) civil society.

Sóng Thần's voluntary work suggests that despite the many years of war, civilians in the RVN did not resign themselves to victimhood. Instead, they led, organized, and participated in civic activities, such as *Sóng Thần's* burial project. While society generally feels compassion for civilians in wars, there is a tendency to assume that they are passive victims. This is true in popular culture as well as academic work. Shane Barter suggests that even in sympathetic scholarship, civilian decisions, strategies, and agency tend to be overlooked.² As Avery Gordon reminds scholars, 'even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents.' In other words, by seeing them only as either victims or superheroes, scholars deny them the 'right to complex personhood.'³

Indeed, in the Vietnam War historiography, literature, and popular culture, Vietnamese civilians have been denied the right to complex personhood in that, when discussed at all, they are often portrayed only as victims. The marginalisation of Vietnamese civilians, as well as Vietnamese political and military leaders in general, can be traced to the complicated and contested nature of this war. The involvement of Cold War powers⁴ in what was essentially a civil war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the RVN,⁵ has overshadowed the roles and experiences of Vietnamese people generally. The current scholarship, however, is making progress in acknowledging Vietnamese agency and has begun to focus more on the war's impact on Vietnamese society.⁶ Nevertheless, civilians' role in the war still has not drawn much interest. This is surprising since both the First and Second Indochina Wars involved the mobilisation of millions of civilians in the war effort. According to Christopher Goscha, the First Indochina War (1946–1954), one of the most totalising post-colonial wars of the twentieth century, relied on the mass mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of civilians in non-combat roles in order to wage a modern war.⁷ Similarly, the Second Indochina (or Vietnam) War, which was both a conventional and an insurgency war, relied heavily on civilian support. As a result, civilians in the DRV and RVN were inflicted with a tremendous amount of violence, in many cases intentionally. Modifying Clausewitz's dictum, Benjamin Valentino states that 'sometimes mass killing [of civilians] is simply war by other means' and in 'this perspective, civilians are not merely bystanders to armed conflict; they play a central,

² Shane Barter, 'Unarmed Forces: Civilian Strategy in Violent Conflicts,' *Peace and Change* 37, no. 4 (October 2012), 544–71.

³ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 4; see also Nguyen Thanh Viet, *Nothing Ever Dies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), *passim*.

⁴ Namely the United States, the Soviet Union, and China.

⁵ The war was further complicated by the existence of the National Liberation Front (NLF), an insurgent movement fighting against the RVN government. Heavily supported by the DRV, the NLF became dominated by its sponsor after the Tet Offensive.

⁶ Although scholars recently have begun to pay attention to the political and military leaders of the DRV and RVN, the historiography of the Vietnam War is still preoccupied with the role of the US and the impact of the war on American society.

⁷ Christopher Goscha, 'A "Total War" of Decolonization? Social Mobilization and State-Building in Communist Vietnam (1949–54),' *War & Society* 31, no. 2 (October 2012), 136–62.

if often involuntary, role as the underwriters of war's material, financial, and human requisites.⁸

This article is concerned with the impact of war on civilians, but also considers civilians' responses to and agency in their 'involuntary' role in the war. In doing so, it also explores an often overlooked spiritual and psychological impact of this war on Vietnamese societies. Recent works of anthropologists have highlighted the profound trauma caused by the war's violent and mass deaths.⁹ As in other societies, Vietnamese people attach great significance to proper funeral and commemorative rituals. A predominant belief in Vietnam holds that the souls of the departed would be condemned to wander without rest if proper mortuary and commemorative rites were not conducted. These restless souls would become angry ghosts and would haunt their families and the communities where they died. This is especially troubling for those killed in brutal and inhuman ways because, unless proper mortuary rituals were carried out, they would have to relive their painful death and endure the injustice of their fate into perpetuity.¹⁰ Writing about Mỹ Lai and Hà Mỹ villages, where civilians were massacred by United States and Republic of Korean troops respectively, Heonik Kwon demonstrates that long after these massacres, the communities continue to suffer because of their inability to provide the necessary burials and rituals.¹¹ Similarly, Mai Lan Gustafsson suggests that the war continues to haunt Vietnamese society in the most literal sense. Because of the violent nature of the war and the tropical environment, many corpses have not been recovered and this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the prescribed mortuary rituals.¹² *Sóng Thần's* endeavour, which was to collect, identify, and bury those who died along the highway, was profoundly important for both the victims' families and the society at large.

The Quảng Trị killing

In the spring of 1972 the DRV mounted a major campaign, commonly referred to in the West as the Easter Offensive.¹³ Even though there were clear signs that the DRV was planning a major offensive in early 1972, the RVN and its US ally were surprised by the magnitude and by the DRV's decision to attack across the demilitarized zone.¹⁴ The first of three attacks was along the demilitarized zone, on the northern border of Quảng Trị province. On 30 March three infantry divisions of the DRV's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) crossed into Quảng Trị province, and in just two days of fighting

⁸ Benjamin Valentino, 'Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians,' *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014), 94.

⁹ Shaun Malarney, "The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice," Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam.' In *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. by Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 46–76; Mai Lan Gustafsson, *War and Shadows: The Haunting of Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Kwon, *After the Massacre*, pp. 123–5.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gustafsson, *passim*.

¹³ Also known in the DRV as Chiến Dịch Xuân Hè, and as Mùa Hè Đỏ Lửa in the RVN.

¹⁴ Lt. General Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, Indochina Monograph Series [1979]), pp. 11, 12.

took over twelve military bases.¹⁵ In subsequent days PAVN troops attacked Kon Tum province in the Central Highlands, and the provinces of Bình Long and Kiến Tường.

The Easter Offensive resulted in high casualty levels for both sides. The PAVN sustained roughly 100,000 casualties, while the ARVN reported approximately 30,000 killed, 78,000 wounded, and 14,000 missing in action.¹⁶ The civilian death toll for both the DRV and RVN, as a consequence of the attack, counterattack, and massive US retaliatory bombing, remains unknown, but undoubtedly was in the many tens of thousands. Journalist Arnold Isaacs provided an example of this violence when he reported that the US/RVN fired 25,000 artillery rounds and carried out as many as forty B-52 raids daily in an effort to retake Quảng Trị city.¹⁷ As a consequence of these US/RVN attacks and earlier PAVN shelling, nearly every building in Quảng Trị city was levelled.

Despite the high level of destruction, no studies have been done on the Offensive's impacts on civilians. Of the killing along the Highway, only a handful of authors have mentioned it.¹⁸ From disparate contemporary and postwar reports, publications, and personal accounts, it is clear that at various times during the period from 28 April until 1 May, 1972, the PAVN shot into columns of civilians and soldiers moving southward from Quảng Trị city.

Vietnam's state-sanctioned historical narrative acknowledges the incident, but contends that PAVN troops were shooting only at retreating ARVN soldiers. According to Vietnam's Military History Institute, the event unfolded as follows:

To the East, the 27th Infantry Regiment [of PAVN] and one mechanized infantry battalion captured the Hai Lang district capital. The 324th Infantry Division attacked strong points in the rear of the enemy's defensive network, cutting Route 1 south of Quang Tri city. Surrounded and isolated, the enemy troops in La Vang-Quang Tri broke and ran. Our troops clung to and pursued them. Accurate fire from our long-range artillery positions created added terror among the enemy troops. Abandoning their vehicles and artillery pieces, enemy troops fled on foot. Many enemy units fled the My Chanh River defensive positions and ran all the way back to Hue. Route 1 from Quang Tri to northern Thua Thien province became a 'highway of death' for the enemy ... At 1800 hours on 2 May the province of Quang Tri was totally liberated.¹⁹

The event is remembered in a similar manner in a *People's Army* newspaper article commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Offensive. The author, Major General Lê Mã Lương (former director of Vietnam's Museum of Military History) states that on 1 May as the PAVN was poised to take Quảng Trị city, the PAVN's 66th Infantry Regiment of the 304th division 'blockaded and attacked the puppet [RVN] troops at La Vang, while at the same time the field artillery fired furiously into the column of

¹⁵ William Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan Little Field, Publication, Inc, 2009), p. 186.

¹⁶ George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2002), p. 309.

¹⁷ Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: the John Hopkins University Press, 1983) p. 25.

¹⁸ The few books that discuss the killing include: Isaacs, pp. 24, 25; Dale Andradé, *Trial by Fire: The 1972 Easter Offensive: America's Last Vietnam Battle* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995), pp. 141-4; Col. Gerald Turley, USMCR [ret.], *The Easter Offensive: The Last American Advisors, Viet Nam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1985), pp. 289, 290.

¹⁹ The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans by Merle Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2002), p. 292.

retreating puppet troops, causing them to abandon their vehicles and artilleries and flee in a chaotic manner.²⁰

Currently in Vietnam the government still maintains that the war was predominantly a war of resistance against American imperialism, waged for the reunification of Vietnam and the liberation of the RVN. As such, in the official historiography, the RVN is portrayed as illegitimate and without any agency. Publications on the Easter Offensive, therefore, focus mostly on the military success and heroism of Communist forces, and on the destructive and relentless US air strikes. Accordingly, Quảng Trị is considered to have been 'liberated' on 2 May 1972, the day that the PAVN took control of the province.²¹ It follows that the attack along Highway One has been framed as a legitimate assault on retreating enemy troops, without any reference to the presence of civilians.

In contrast, the RVN government (before it was defeated in 1975) claimed that the PAVN intentionally targeted civilians.²² Bolstering the RVN's assertion was the confession of PAVN Private Lê Xuân Thủy, who was serving as a radio operator for the 4th Battalion, 324th Division when he defected on 31 July 1972.²³ At an RVN government-organized press conference on 8 September, Thủy revealed that his unit had been ordered to 'maintain an ambush position along Route 1' for six days to allow other PAVN troops to capture Quảng Trị city.²⁴ Thủy's commander had instructed his unit to shoot into the column of people fleeing Quảng Trị, even though it was clear that many civilians were present. The troops were told that the refugees were the enemy because they were opting to leave rather than stay. Troops were commanded to shoot at all vehicles, including civilian cars, buses, and bicycles. According to Thủy, this event shook his faith in the DRV and led to his defection.

The testimony of one defector in state custody does not make for credible evidence. His assertion that the PAVN fired on civilians, however, corresponds with other contemporary reports and eyewitness accounts. Many observers reported that civilian presence on the road was clearly discernable during the attack.

The event in question unfolded throughout the last days of April as the PAVN closed in on Quảng Trị city, causing many ARVN troops to flee south on Highway One. In addition to the south-bound troops, there were other ARVN troops moving north in order to clear the road for retreat and to supply posts still under ARVN control.²⁵ Many eyewitnesses maintained that a considerable number of civilians were mixed into this traffic. Taking into account that the population of Quảng Trị city—around 20,000—was

²⁰ Major General Lê Mã Lương, 'Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, năm 1972: Cuộc đụng đầu lịch sử, bài 2: Giải Phóng Quảng Trị' *Quan Doi Nhan Dan Online*, 27 March 2012. Accessed 12 November 2015. <<http://www.qdnd.vn/quoc-phong-an-ninh/xay-dung-quan-doi/quang-tri-thua-thien-nam-1972-cuoc-dung-dau-lich-su-bai-2-439588>>.

²¹ *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 292.

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RVN, *The Communist Policy of Terror* (Saigon: n.p., December 1972), pp. 23–44. Folder 13, Box 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 11 May 2017. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2311413025>>.

²³ 'Defector Tells of Massacre by Enemy at Quang Tri,' *New York Times*, 9 September 1972, p. 6; Tom Peterson, 'Slaughter of Viet Civilians Described by Ex-Red Soldiers,' *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 6 September 1972, p. 6. Folder 13, Box 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 11 May 2017. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2311413003>>.

²⁴ 'Defector Tells of Massacre,' *New York Times*, 9 September 1972, p. 6.

²⁵ Because I cite two authors with the last name Turley, please keep this reference as: Gerald Turley, pp. 281–9; Andradé, pp. 141–4.

in a panic at the impending loss of their city and by ‘rampant’ rumours that the PAVN ‘was about to unleash a massive artillery attack,’²⁶ it is not surprising that there would have been a large number of civilians on the highway. Colonel Gerald Turley, senior advisor for the 3rd ARVN Division in charge of the defense of the DMZ area, estimated that by 30 April only 8000–10,000 people remained in the city,²⁷ and more would leave in the following two days.

Both American and Vietnamese newspapers consistently noted that the PAVN fired on the column of civilians and ARNV soldiers along the highway. Fox Butterfield of the *New York Times*, for example, reported on 30 April that ‘South Vietnamese troops and refugees fleeing south toward Hue came under small-arms fire from Communist troops on both sides of Route 1 just south of Quang Tri.’²⁸ Sidney Schanberg stated that the PAVN ‘dug in only 50 feet from the road on both sides’ and were shooting at military trucks, some of which carried refugees.²⁹ Schanberg’s article was accompanied by two photographs, one of which is an aerial view of the highway congested with people, the majority of whom were clearly civilians, wearing conical hats and burdened with their belongings. Describing the incident, Peter Braestrup wrote: ‘... on April 26, the enemy began shelling Quang Tri and refugees streamed south 40 miles to Hue. Hundreds of them were slain by North Vietnamese ambushers firing rockets at close range on Highway 1.’³⁰ More graphic is Holger Jensen’s account: ‘On Highway 1, South Vietnam—bodies and parts of bodies litter this unhappy highway southeast of besieged Quang Tri city. A baby’s torso. The head of a woman. A leg.’³¹ Two photographs were included, one of a toddler crying along the side of the road and the other is a bus packed with soldiers and civilians, some hanging over the sides and others on top. Reporting from the Highway for a respected Vietnamese daily, Nguyễn Tú described the road as ‘a corridor of blood’ [*hành lang máu*].³²

In the confusion of the retreat and attack, it is not surprising that there is a lack of data regarding the number of civilians in comparison to military personnel among those fleeing Quảng Trị; most reports simply emphasise the significant presence of both civilians and soldiers. In a classified incidence report for the US Air Force, though, Captain David Mann estimated that although ninety-five percent of the vehicles were military, three-quarters of the people were civilian:

As the combat activity surged towards Quang Tri City, refugee foot and vehicular traffic congested the highways leading to Hue. The first and largest group of refugees assembled in Quang Tri City early on 29 April and then moved approximately six miles south on Route 1, to the vicinity of Hai Lang District Town...At this point, the convoy came under attack by NVA direct and indirect fire. Lead vehicles were stopped immediately, and mass confusion ensued. *Although three quarters of the people in the convoy were civilians, 95 percent of*

²⁶ Gerald Turley, pp. 41 & 283.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

²⁸ Fox Butterfield, ‘Enemy Artillery Batters Quangtri as Ring Tightens,’ *New York Times*, 30 April 1972, p. 20, cont from page 1.

²⁹ Sidney Schanberg, ‘Convoys to Quang Tri Blocked: Refugees Crowd Hue,’ *New York Times*, 30 April 1972, p. 20.

³⁰ Peter Braestrup, ‘Refugees and Hope Returning to Hue,’ *Washington Post*, 19 May 1972, p. A25.

³¹ Holger Jensen, ‘Quang Tri refugee path: a scene of gore, defeat,’ *The Boston Globe*, 30 April 1972, p. 19; see also, *the Chicago Tribune*, ‘Quang Tri is Encircled,’ 29 April 1972, p. 1 and ‘Reds Press Offensive in North,’ 30 April 1972, p. 1.

³² Nguyễn Tú, ‘Quốc Lộ số 1 bắc Mỹ Chánh: Hành lang dẫm máu đầu súng sỡ,’ *Chính Luận*, 3 May 1972, p. 1.

the vehicles in the column were military; the majority were two and one-half ton trucks plus a considerable number of flatbeds, tankers, small trucks, jeeps, and 15 ambulances...MR I Red Cross officials placed the death toll at 2000, including women, children, and elderly and sick evacuees from Quang Tri hospitals.³³ (emphasis is mine)

In addition to journalistic and military reports, eyewitnesses also confirm that many civilians were on Highway One. Some of these eyewitnesses included US Marine senior advisors, Majors Robert Sheridan and Donald Price, who were positioned along the south bank of the Mĩ Chánh River where they had an 'unobstructed view' of Highway One for at least eight miles north toward Quảng Trị.³⁴ Price was also tasked with accompanying the 5th Battalion on 29 April to open up the highway, which the PAVN had blocked at several places. Sheridan and Price attested that they 'had seen the civilians brought under fire by 130-mm artillery shells fired over their heads with delayed action fuses.' The bursts 'literally shredded the refugee column.'³⁵

Stories from survivors provide another dimension to this tragic episode. Lê Trong Lộc, who is now a physician in the US, was a boy when his family of twelve fled Quảng Trị. The family's only motorcycle blew a tire, and they ended up pushing the vehicle down Highway One, which was choked with civilian and military vehicles:

It became increasingly more difficult for my father and us two brothers to push the motorcycle along because there was no more room on the pavement. Blood ran all over the road. Corpses were no longer intact, their arms and legs were scattered here and there.³⁶

In this congestion and confusion, Lộc noticed a monk riding a bicycle. At that moment he envied the monk's bicycle because it enabled him to get through the mass of people. A little later, he saw the monk again; this time the monk was lying beside the coveted bicycle while his severed head was a few feet away.³⁷ Fortunately for Lộc's family, all their members managed to make it to Huế unscathed. Some of his siblings avoided the highway altogether by using village roads.

Similarly, Phan Văn Châu relates a harrowing story of leaving Quảng Trị on 29 April with his family and his elder sister's family.³⁸ In the chaos of the attack he lost track of his family except for his nephew. After the barrage of fire, Châu and his nephew started looking for the rest of their family; in desperation, they began turning over corpses. They ended up spending the night on the highway, huddled among the corpses. The next day they left the highway and used the backroads to get to Mĩ Chánh, where they were reunited with the rest of the family.³⁹

³³ David Mann, *Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and Defense of Hue*. Project CHECO Report (Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations), Directorate of Operations Analysis, Declassified, 15 Mar 1973, p. 41.

³⁴ Sheridan was the senior advisor to the 369th Marine Brigade while Price was senior advisor to the 5th Battalion, 369th Marine Brigade; Gerald Turley, p. 260.

³⁵ As quoted in 'N. Viet Massacre of Civilians Told: 1,000-2,000 Reported Killed Near Quang Tri,' *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 1972, p. A1; For more of Sheridan's description, see Gerald Turley, p. 290.

³⁶ Lê Trong Lộc, 'Người đi trong "Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng,"' in *Quê Ngoại: Những bài viết về Quảng Trị*, ed. by Hoàng Long Hải (Gardena, CA: Van Moi, 2009), p. 410.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

³⁸ As recounted in Hà Mai Việt, *Thép và Máu: Thiết-giáp trong chiến-tranh Việt-Nam* (USA: no publisher, 2015), pp. 116, 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 117.

The full extent of the attack was known only in July, after the ARVN regained the southern parts of Quảng Trị province. As mentioned above, the two reporters who broke the story for *Sóng Thần*, Ngy Thanh and Đoàn Kế Tường, were among the first to return to the highway. Being members of the military force themselves, both reporters arrived with the troops on 1 July.⁴⁰ As the airborne headed toward Quảng Trị city on the western side of Highway One and the marines on the eastern side, the two reporters went on their own and found a way across the Bến Đá Bridge, which had been destroyed in late April. Because they arrived before the ARVN troops, Ngy Thanh and Tường were able to witness the scene before soldiers cleared the highway of vehicles and bodies to make it passable.

According to Ngy Thanh and Đoàn Kế Tường's article, published on 3 July, the 10-km stretch of highway southeast of Quảng Trị city was a scene of mass destruction. The road was obstructed by damaged tanks, buses, cars, and Red Cross vehicles with stretchers still inside. Motorcycles were abandoned with keys in the ignition. Strewn around and in these wrecks were hundreds of bodies; some were soldiers but most were civilians, including women and children.⁴¹ Many more bodies could be found in the sandy banks along both sides of the highway, the soft sand acting as their grave. The reporters noted that because the corpses had been there since the end of April, a significant number had already begun to decompose.

In an essay written shortly after breaking the news, Tường described how upon seeing the 'terrible hell' along the highway, he had 'burst into a loud sob, full of indignation and resentment.'⁴² Encountering the aftermath of the attack was particularly difficult for him because at the end of April he was among the thousands who fled southward on the highway. Wrestling with survivor's guilt, Tường, a Quảng Trị native, confessed: 'In fleeing, I trampled upon the bodies of my brothers, sisters, and relatives without daring to look back.'⁴³

Other Vietnamese journalists reported equally horrifying sights along the highway when they returned in July.⁴⁴ War correspondents Vũ Thanh Thủy and Dương Phục recorded in their joint memoir the eerie and surreal sight that they encountered along this stretch of highway.⁴⁵ According to them, there were so many corpses that it was difficult for journalists to walk along the shoulders of the highway. They had to use walking sticks to help avoid stepping on corpses.⁴⁶ Arnold Isaacs, who arrived in Quảng Trị a couple of days after the ARVN, described the highway as 'one of the most appalling scenes of the entire war.'⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Ngy Thanh, 'Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng,' *Thời Báo*, 20 November 2009, pp. 57–9.

⁴¹ Ngy Thanh and Đoàn Kế Tường, 'Xác dân tử nạn trở xương nằm dài 2 cs trên quốc lộ 1,' *Sóng Thần*, 3 July 1972, p. 1; see also, 'Trên quốc lộ 1 nổi Quảng Trị với Huế: Đoạn đường kinh hoàng,' *Sóng Thần*, 5 July 1972, p. 1.

⁴² Đoàn Kế Tường, 'Mỹ Chánh, Quảng Trị: Chặng đường ngút ngàn tử khị' in *Những Ngày Dài trên Quê Hương: Bút Ký Chiến Trường* [no editor]. (First published Saigon: Van Nghe Dan Toc, 1972. Reprint, Fort Smith, AR: Song Moi, 1980), p. 40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See for example, Lê Văn Thiệp, 'Những hình ảnh khùng khiếp trên Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng,' *Chính Luận*, 4 July 1972, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Dương Phục and Vũ Thanh Thủy, *Tình Yêu Ngục Tù & Vượt Biển* (Houston: Saigon-Houston Publisher, 2016), pp. 309–316.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 313–5.

⁴⁷ Isaacs, p. 25.

Like many other wartime mass killings, there is some dispute about the number of people killed.⁴⁸ On the low side, Holger Jensen placed the number between 200 and 600. On the high side, correspondents Dương Phục and Vũ Thanh Thủy estimated 5000.⁴⁹ According to Dale Andradé, former senior researcher and writer for the US Army Center of Military History, the Red Cross estimated 2000 deaths, including many who had been evacuated from the Quảng Trị hospital.⁵⁰ Majors Robert Sheridan and Donald Price believed approximately 2000 people were killed. They said that there were actually two assaults on refugees, one taking place on April 24, and then another on April 29–30.⁵¹ According to *Sóng Thần*'s record, the number of bodies recovered was 1841.⁵²

Beside the total number of deaths, it is also unclear what percentage of those killed along Highway One were civilian as opposed to military. From the aforementioned reports and accounts, the civilian presence was significant, if not the majority. Moreover, as already noted, Captain David Mann estimated that three-quarters of the people in the convoy were civilians. Nguyễn Kinh Châu recollects that most of the bodies recovered by *Sóng Thần* were civilians, some were ARVN troops, and about 100 were PAVN soldiers. Based on data published in *Sóng Thần* at that time, it appears that most of the bodies recovered were civilians. Until late September, *Sóng Thần* regularly printed descriptions of each corpse recovered, providing names (when available) and/or any distinguishing characteristics in order to help families with identification. From the lists published from 20 July to 9 August, out of 129 bodies recovered, only thirty-five were military, the rest were women and children (42), men (35), and unidentifiable (17). Of the last category, eleven were evidently civilian because of the clothing associated with the remains.⁵³ In other words, sixty-eight percent of the bodies were civilians while twenty-seven percent were soldiers. While this is only a small sampling of the data, it does suggest that a significant number—if not the majority—of those killed along the highway were civilians.

Even though the civilian death toll in this incident was high, some scholars may not consider it a 'massacre' because of the considerable and obvious presence of military personnel and vehicles. Within the convention of modern warfare, attacking a retreating army is deemed acceptable.⁵⁴ The civilian victims in these cases would typically be considered 'collateral damage,' an unfortunate but common consequence of modern warfare. Others differ. According to some scholars of mass killings and atrocities, one

⁴⁸ Among the most controversial mass killing in terms of disputed numbers is the Nanjing Massacre: Joshual Fogel, ed. *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (California: University of California Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Holger Jensen, 'No Signs of 'Civilian Massacre' in Quang Tri Slaughter,' *The Ledger*, Lakehead, Florida, 10 August 1972, p. 11A; Dương Phục and Vũ Thanh Thủy, footnote 3, 315.

⁵⁰ Andradé, p. 144.

⁵¹ Nicholas Ruggieri (IPS Correspondent), 'Witnesses Tell of N. Vietnam Massacre of Civilians,' 07 August 1972, Folder 12, Box 14, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 8 May 2017. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2311412029>>.

⁵² Telephone interview with Nguyễn Kinh Châu, who now lives in Ho Chi Minh City, 29 June 2016.

⁵³ I used data published up to 9 August; after this date there are some inconsistencies. Also, I am missing data for three days (24 July, 4–5 August), and so my calculation is short 26 bodies whose descriptions would have been printed in those issues.

⁵⁴ Michael Wutzer, *Arguing about War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 97.

defining characteristic of a massacre is the asymmetry of power at the time of the event.⁵⁵ Mark Levene states:

[a] massacre is when a group of animals or people lacking in self-defence, at least at that given moment, are killed—usually by another group...who have the physical means, the power with which to undertake the killing without physical danger to themselves. A massacre is unquestionable a one-sided affair and those slaughtered are usually thus perceived of as victims; even as innocents.⁵⁶

Consequently, according to Levene, it is possible to have a military massacre, ‘when remnants of a defeated army are cut down in flight.’⁵⁷ While many may not agree with Levene’s idea of a military massacre, the act of mowing down a group of retreating soldiers and civilians often raises moral and ethical issues. Although some contemporary observers did use the term massacre when writing about it, other did not.⁵⁸ Whatever term was used, all were united in expressing shock and horror. Even Holger Jensen, who denied that the total number killed was no more than 600 and rejected the notion that the PAVN deliberately targeted civilians, described the event as a ‘carnage’ and ‘slaughter.’ Moreover, he wrote that the PAVN showed a ‘callous disregard for civilian targets.’⁵⁹ Unfortunately, in this war, the DRV was not the only side guilty of indiscriminate violence against and disregard for civilians. The US and the RVN were just as culpable on this front.⁶⁰

Sóng Thần and its activities

Reports of many hundreds of unburied corpses strewn along the highway prompted *Sóng Thần*’s staff to take action. They named their endeavour ‘*Thác Một Năm Mộ*’ [one dies in a grave], alluding to the Vietnamese proverb that underscores the importance of having basic accommodations for the living and the dead: one lives in a house and dies in a grave.⁶¹

Sóng Thần was not unique in its civic activism. Many major newspapers and journals were similarly engaged in supporting various charities and causes. In fact, many Vietnamese people throughout the RVN were involved in civic and social activities. Voluntary organizations, religious groups, and professional associations performed charitable work, such as helping the poor, orphans, and victims of war. Encouraged by Confucian, Buddhist, and Christian beliefs in charity and social responsibility, Vietnamese society has had a long-standing philanthropic and self-help tradition. During the French colonial period, the government actively encouraged charitable work and

⁵⁵ Mark Levene, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Massacre in History*, ed. by Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 5; Jacques Sémelin, ‘From Massacre to the Genocidal Process,’ *International Social Science Journal* 54, Issue 174 (December 2002), 436.

⁵⁶ Levene, p. 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ For example, Major Robert Sheridan refers to this event as a massacre. ‘N. Viet Massacre of Civilians Told,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 1972, p. A1.

⁵⁹ Holger Jensen, ‘No Signs of “Civilian Massacre” in Quang Tri Slaughter.’

⁶⁰ For a discussion of war atrocities see Karen Sleezer, ‘Atrocities and War Crimes,’ in *The Vietnam War Handbook of the Literature and Research*, ed. by James Olson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 193–230.

⁶¹ Trùng Dương, ‘Vận động nghĩa cử đắp một năm mồ yên nghĩ,’ *Sóng Thần*, 20 July 1972, p. 1.

mutual-help to ease pressure on its own budget.⁶² This tradition continued into the post-1954 period in the RVN, leading to the proliferation of voluntary associations, particularly those concerned with philanthropy.⁶³

During the Easter Offensive of 1972 the need for voluntary relief intensified. The attacks in all four military regions produced hundreds of thousands of refugees. According to a US embassy report, as of mid-June there were 800,000 refugees, of which 500,000 were from Military Region I.⁶⁴ Because of the ongoing fighting, the 'brunt of the [relief] effort had to be carried out largely by local officials and voluntary workers,' from groups such as the Vietnam Confederation of Labor and the Ân Quang Buddhist Welfare Organization.⁶⁵ Vietnamese newspaper reports also confirmed the high level of voluntarism. The faculty of Saigon University, for example, spearheaded a campaign in which members donated one day's pay to a refugee fund.⁶⁶ The students of Saigon University put on a benefit show while Vạn Hạnh University raised 500,000 đồng in funds in addition to material aid. Therefore, *Sóng Thần's* work to recover and bury the corpses along Highway One is one example among many.

While *Sóng Thần's* voluntarism was not unique, the newspaper's origin was singular. The paper was founded for the purpose of exposing official corruption.⁶⁷ Inspired by the work of an anti-corruption activist, Dr. Hà Thúc Nhơn, a group of writers and intellectuals established *Sóng Thần* to continue Nhơn's work after he was killed. Founded on 9 November 1970, the Hà Thúc Nhơn group coalesced around the weekly journal, *Đời* [Life], which was owned by a group member, Chu Tử. Shortly after its formation, the group launched a cooperative publishing company whose first job was to produce *Sóng Thần*, a daily newspaper completely devoted to exposing corruption and injustice.

By 1970 corruption had become a major issue for many in the RVN. As a consequence, many popular newspapers often investigated scandals and corruption. *Sóng Thần*, however, made this its priority. Moreover, *Sóng Thần* also presented itself as a populist paper, catering to the ordinary people throughout the country and not just the urban elite.⁶⁸ Toward this goal, the paper established itself as a cooperative newspaper—possibly the only one in the RVN. People were encouraged to buy shares and thereby become collective owners of the paper. The paper estimated that it would need ten million đồng (approximately USD 25,000⁶⁹) to begin publishing and wanted

⁶² Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁶³ Van Nguyen-Marshall, 'The Associational Life of the Vietnamese Middle Class in Saigon (1950s–1970s),' in *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, ed. by Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa Drummond, and Daniele Belanger (Singapore: The Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in cooperation with Springer Publishing, 2012), pp. 59–75.

⁶⁴ United States Embassy in Saigon, 'Assessment of Easter Offensive, June 24, 1972,' Folder 04, Box 24, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01—Assessment and Strategy, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 8 May 2017. <<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2122404016>>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ 'Dân Quảng Trị tràn ngập Huế, Đà Nẵng,' *Chính Luận*, 2 May 1972, p. 3.

⁶⁷ The first issue was published on 25 September 1971 and ceased publication in February 1975. Uyên Thao, 'Giấy bút làm than,' *Có Thơm Magazine*, December 2001. <http://cothommagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=549&Itemid=1> (accessed 6 October 2015).

⁶⁸ 'Sóng Thần tiếng nói sau cùng của nhân dân ta,' *Đời* 98 (2–9 September 1971), 34–5.

⁶⁹ The average black market rate of exchange in 1970 was 393 đồng per US dollar. Douglas Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development South Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Table 9.5, 190.

to raise half this amount through selling shares and the other half through loans. By 20 August 1971 the paper received over 3.5 million đồng (USD 8906) from 209 people. While this was less than their goal, it was still an impressive amount, especially considering the ongoing war and the socio-economic uncertainties of that time. By 1971 the war was impinging more aggressively on people's lives. Following the Tet Offensive, the military draft had recently been expanded to include all men between the ages of 18 and 33 for an indefinite tenure.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the ongoing US-DRV negotiations must have caused people to worry about what a total US withdrawal would mean for their country in military and economic terms. This was undoubtedly a stressful time, and yet people were not consumed and paralyzed with fear and apprehension. Instead, they were still concerned about wider social issues, such as government accountability and social justice, and continued to engage in civic activities.

True to its goal, *Sóng Thần* made exposing malfeasance in high places its mandate for the duration of its publication.⁷¹ Although the paper reported on major news events, its main focus was investigating and reporting on cases of bribery, embezzlement, and general abuse of power throughout Vietnam. The paper relentlessly pursued both local and national cases, despite threats of reprisal.

As expected, *Sóng Thần*'s penchant for investigating officials did not endear the paper to local or national authorities. In addition to highlighting official corruption, the paper did not hesitate to point out the government's failings. During the Easter Offensive, *Sóng Thần* along with numerous other newspapers were frequently found in contravention of the press law for their candid battle coverage. As a result, many papers were confiscated and charged for violation of the press law. *Sóng Thần* was confiscated five times in April 1972, causing great financial losses for the paper.⁷² *Sóng Thần*'s relationship with the government worsened in the subsequent months when President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, citing the Easter Offensive as a reason, declared martial law, expanded his executive power, and promulgated a more restrictive press decree. Thiệu's repressive moves drove *Sóng Thần* and other oppositional papers to become even more critical and vocal in their demands for more freedom of the press.

While at loggerheads with the government for most of its publishing life, the paper was not against the war nor was it sympathetic toward the NLF/DRV. In fact, *Sóng Thần*, particularly Uyên Thao and Chu Tử, strongly opposed communism and believed the paper's anti-corruption efforts actually contributed to the RVN's fighting capability.⁷³ In this context, the paper's burial project could be interpreted as an oblique criticism of the government for being overwhelmed by the DRV's attack and also for its neglect of the victims. According to Uyên Thao, someone close to Thiệu reported that the President was angry and considered the project a personal attack on him.⁷⁴ While there is no documentary evidence to support this, it is clear that neither Thiệu nor his government

⁷⁰ Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), p. 11.

⁷¹ The paper was under the leadership of Uyên Thao (managing director), Trùng Dương (publisher), and Chu Tử (editor-in-chief and former publisher of *Đời*).

⁷² *Tài liệu của bộ nội vụ v/v tịch thu và truy tố báo chí loan tin hại cho an ninh, tháng 4, 1972* [Ministry of Interior document regarding confiscation and suing of newspapers that spread news harmful to security]. Vietnam National Archive 2 (Ho Chi Minh City), Prime Minister's Office, 17579.

⁷³ Interview with Uyên Thao, 23 July 2015.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

provided any official support to the recovery project. To be fair, the government was bogged down with fighting the PAVN and trying to regain lost territories. *Sóng Thần*, however, did receive help on an informal basis from the local government officials and regional units of the ARVN. Their support along with the participation of residents of Thừa Thiên province and donors throughout the country demonstrated that this was a grassroots undertaking and a prime example of civil society in action.

Sóng Thần's burial project

Bold and iconoclastic, *Sóng Thần* was within its purview when it embarked on the recovery and burial project on 9 July, six days after its first report about the grisly aftermath of the assault. As the RVN was still in the throes of defending itself on multiple fronts, the government had not had time to collect and bury the corpses. *Sóng Thần*, therefore, spearheaded this work for Quảng Trị victims. The paper began by canvassing for donations to cover expenses, such as the cost of plastic body bags, coffins, and transportation. The paper calculated that it would cost about 2000 đồng to collect and bury one corpse.⁷⁵ The responses from readers were heartening. Within just one month, the paper received 1.8 million đồng. By 8 August the paper raised 2.9 million đồng, and by the end of August, when the total reached three million (USD 7634), the paper announced that it had enough funds and would stop taking donations.⁷⁶ By the end of the project the paper had a surplus of half a million, which it used to build a stele and a shrine to honour the victims.⁷⁷

Donations came from all sectors of society, from wealthy to poor. People gave as individuals while others organized through their social network. A teacher in Quảng Ngãi led his students and the local Boy Scouts to canvas for donations.⁷⁸ The Philanthropic Association for Maternal Care of Đà Nẵng raised 20,000 đồng.⁷⁹ A group of market women made a collective donation. In one extraordinary example, an illiterate woman who had heard about the campaign, walked nearly 4 km to *Sóng Thần's* office to donate 1000 đồng in person.⁸⁰

In addition to financial aid from readers, the local community in the Huế area—including individuals, Buddhist groups, and disabled veterans' associations—provided logistical support, space for identifying the corpses, and land for a cemetery.⁸¹ *Sóng Thần's* staff in Huế and Quảng Trị, particularly the paper's Huế office director, Nguyễn Kinh Châu, were most directly involved with the work. As the de facto manager of the project, Châu had detailed knowledge of the project from start to finish. In 2009, he could still recount clearly the many people who contributed.⁸² For example, before their call for donation yielded results, the Chair of the Provincial Council, who also owned a jewellery store, lent the group 50,000 đồng so that they could start making coffins.⁸³ Major Nguyễn Văn Cơ, head of the military hospital in Military Region I, donated

⁷⁵ 'Vận động nghĩa cử đáp một năm mồ yên nghi,' *Sóng Thần*, 20 July 1972, p. 1.

⁷⁶ 'Số lược về việc chi tiêu sau hai đợt lượm xác,' *Sóng Thần*, 26 September 1972, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Nguyễn Kinh Châu, 'Bảy tháng giữa những xác người,' *Thời Báo* (Toronto), 20 November 2009.

⁷⁸ 'Sóng mái nhà, thối năm mồ,' 1 August 1972, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Trùng Dương, 'Đắp một năm mồ,' *Sóng Thần*, 20 July 1972, pp. 1 & 3.

⁸⁰ Trùng Dương, 'Đi nhặt xác,' *Sóng Thần*, 22 July 1972, p. 3; 'Đi nhặt xác,' 3 August 1972, p. 3.

⁸¹ Interview with Uyên Thao, Falls Church, Virginia, 23 July 2015.

⁸² Nguyễn Kinh Châu, 'Bảy tháng giữa những xác người,' pp. 107–9.

⁸³ This was Mr Huỳnh Văn Phúc. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

200 nylon body bags. Later when more bodies continued to be recovered, the hospital provided more bags. In addition, local ARVN forces in Thừa Thiên and Quảng Trị provinces lent them several military (GMC) trucks for transporting workers and corpses.⁸⁴ Individual volunteers were also helpful. Buddhist monk Thích Đức Tâm was in charge of getting coffins made; Tôn Nữ Mộng Nhiên's house became headquarters and home for those involved in the project. Nhiên and her sister also accompanied the group to the highway where they kept records of the bodies recovered and their belongings.⁸⁵

Trùng Dương, the paper's publisher, spent a week with the crew in Quảng Trị and wrote a series of articles, describing the physical and emotional difficulties of the work.⁸⁶ According to her report, every day the crew would travel to the highway where they would try to identify the bodies before bagging them. Each corpse was numbered and given a brief description; the corpses were then brought to Phong Điền primary school (Phong Điền district) in Thừa Thiên-Hue province. People would gather there at the end of the day to see if the bodies of their loved ones had been recovered. In addition to all the challenges of seeing, smelling, handling, and identifying hundreds of corpses on a daily basis, volunteers had to dodge mortar attacks and unexploded ordinance, as the battle for Quảng Trị was still raging. In fact, one member of the *Sóng Thần* work crew was killed in a shelling attack.⁸⁷

As there were people in the Huế area who had helped with the corpse collection after the 1968 Tet Offensive, which left an estimated 2000 civilians dead in Huế, *Sóng Thần* decided to hire a few of them. Trùng Dương remembers how these experienced workers would bring whiskey to help calm their nerves and to disinfect their hands before eating lunch.⁸⁸ Other workers brought shrimp paste (*mắm ruốc*), hoping the pungent smell of the paste would mask the odour of decomposing corpses.⁸⁹ These workers not only knew the tricks of the trade, but also had personal encounters with unquiet spirits of the Tet Offensive. According to their stories, these spirits occasionally tried to guide the workers in their search for bodies. In one instance, a night visit from two female ghosts helped a worker recover the bodies of two sisters the next morning. In another, a dead man came back to tell his mother and wife that the skull they had buried with his body was not actually his.⁹⁰ The workers' spectral encounters underscore the spiritual and psychic importance of *Sóng Thần*'s burial project to Vietnamese society at large.

Almost a month after they began their work, *Sóng Thần* recovered 202 bodies, seventy-four of which had been claimed and buried by their families.⁹¹ The first collective funeral ceremony was held on 1 August for the 128 unclaimed bodies. The second round of work began on 8 August. By then the work was becoming even more difficult because the bodies had sunken deeper into the sand. Digging had to be done with extra care to avoid compromising the corpses further.⁹² By 22 November the total number of people

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ For other local supporters, see: Trần Tường Trình, 'Nỗi buồn của những người còn sống trên Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng,' *Sóng Thần*, 26 September 1972, p. 11.

⁸⁶ Trùng Dương, 'Nhật báo Sóng Thần và các thân hữu với chương trình: Đi nhặt xác đồng bào Q. Trị trên đường "Kinh Hoàng,'" *Sóng Thần*, 11 July 1972, pp. 1 & 3; see also her articles on 12–16 July 1972.

⁸⁷ Interview with Uyên Thao by telephone, 9 June 2015.

⁸⁸ Trùng Dương, 'Hốt xác đồng bào tử nạn trên "Đại Lộ Kinh Hoàng,'" *Thời Báo*, 20 November 2009, p. 105.

⁸⁹ Nguyễn Kinh Châu, p. 109.

⁹⁰ Trùng Dương, 'Đi nhắc xác,' 14 July 1972, p. 3.

⁹¹ *Sóng Thần*, 3 August 1972, p. 1.

⁹² 'Nằm mồ yên nghỉ,' *Sóng Thần*, 14 August 1972, p. 1.

buried reached 580.⁹³ As mentioned above, the work took about seven months to finish. In the end, according to Nguyễn Kinh Châu, *Sóng Thần* recovered 1841 bodies.⁹⁴

A cemetery for these victims was established in Hội Kỳ commune, in Phong Điền district, Thừa Thiên-Huế province. Unfortunately, after the war the cemetery and the stele were both destroyed.⁹⁵ In an effort to control the social memory of the war, the victorious communist government demolished many public monuments and grave sites of the old regime.⁹⁶ Cemetery land was also sometimes claimed by the state for other use. In these instances, the authorities would inform the public of the plan and those who could, would move their loved ones' remains to another site.⁹⁷ Unclaimed bodies would typically be moved to a mass grave at another location.⁹⁸ It is unclear when and for what official reason the cemetery of the Quảng Trị victims was eradicated. It is also unclear where the mass grave currently resides, because the remains were moved not once, but twice.⁹⁹

Considering the importance Vietnamese tradition places on mortuary practices, the destruction of the cemetery and multiple relocations of the bodies into mass graves undoubtedly caused anguish for the families and local community. One could consider these acts as another injustice perpetrated on the victims. As mentioned above, many Vietnamese believe that proper burial rituals and commemoration are essential in order to safeguard the deceased person's passage into the afterlife. Being buried in a mass grave is even more troubling, for it does not allow for proper commemorative rituals to be performed.¹⁰⁰ Trapped, the souls of the victims are condemned to relive the painful trauma that caused their violent death in the first place.

Conclusion

While the idea of non-combatant immunity is widely accepted,¹⁰¹ there have been few wars in which civilians have been spared. The Vietnam War, infamous for having surpassed the Second World War in the total tonnage of bombs dropped, has produced untold numbers of civilian casualties in Vietnam (both DRV and RVN), Cambodia and Laos. This paper examines just one group of victims among many. Overlooked by historians, the killing along Highway One is an example of Vietnamese-on-Vietnamese violence, a phenomenon that also does not get much scholarly attention.¹⁰² Nevertheless, this was an important incident that underscores the civil-war nature of the conflict,

⁹³ 'An táng đợt III,' *Sóng Thần*, 22 November 1972, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Telephone interview with Nguyễn Kinh Châu, 29 June 2016.

⁹⁵ The memorial still stands along the highway, however.

⁹⁶ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *In The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 191; Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, 'Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?' *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005), 160.

⁹⁷ Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 99 & 217, footnote 20.

⁹⁸ Kwon, *After the Massacre*, pp. 120–3.

⁹⁹ This information came from Ngy Thanh who has been searching for the graveyard. Email communication with Ngy Thanh, 14 October 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Kwon, *After the Massacre*, pp. 120–3.

¹⁰¹ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (Basic Books, 2000), pp. 135–7.

¹⁰² A point made by François Guillemot, 'Autopsy of a Massacre: On a Political Purge in the Early Days of the Indochina War,' *EJEAS*, 9, no. 2 (2010): 230.

reminding readers that while Cold-War powers were involved, the brunt of the fighting was done by Vietnamese of both the communist and non-communist sides.

The Quảng Trị killing is also significant in that it illuminates how civilians responded to the violence of war. When news spread about the unburied corpses along the highway, ordinary people acted. Rather than wait for the government, *Sóng Thần* initiated a burial project and people participated with enthusiasm. From the perspective of those who contributed to the burial project, this was not just a civic duty, but an act that had spiritual ramifications for the dead and the living communities. The concern for the welfare of the dead points back to Avery Gordon's idea of a 'complex personhood.' This paper shows that Vietnamese were not only victims of war, but were also their own rescuers and perpetrators of violence. As subjects with agency, Vietnamese people have the capacity for altruism and atrocity, just as any other people.¹⁰³ Moreover, the complexity of their existence pertains not only to the material world, but the afterlife, which was always relevant and present even in its absence.

The burial project and *Sóng Thần*'s own history are also noteworthy for they provide more insight into the society of the RVN. Since very little research has been done on the social history of the RVN, there is a tendency to assume that civil society did not exist or was weak. This article suggests otherwise. Indeed, in examining *Sóng Thần*'s endeavours, one sees a socially conscious public willing to engage with issues and participate in collective actions. When donating money to establish *Sóng Thần*, readers were expressing their support for the paper's anti-corruption campaign. More than that, however, their support reveals a deep desire for an independent, activist press that would work for social justice and government accountability. *Sóng Thần* consciously projected itself as the people's paper, particularly in its decision to operate as a cooperative. The burial project certainly bolstered this image. The project relied on grassroots support and volunteers, and tried to assuage one of the most troubling aspects of war for the Vietnamese population. It is even more impressive that this burial project took place during a militarily and politically trying period. The RVN had been attacked on multiple fronts and was initially overwhelmed, losing territories to the DRV. Despite the precarious situation and wartime restrictions on freedom, the RVN's civil society remained active and dynamic. Concerned citizens articulated collective concerns and worked together to solve them. From taking down corrupt politicians, to bringing peace to the spirits of the dead, this was a population that was civically engaged.

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¹⁰³ A point also made by Viet Thanh Nguyen, chapter 3.

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