Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam, 1948-1964

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CHAPTER 5

The Life of the Dead

We must give credit to man’s talent and intelligence for success in the many acts of life, for if we attribute everything to spirits and ghosts we make a mockery of man himself. We believe that the only temples worth venerating are those of loyal subjects, the heroes and faithful servants of the country.

Phan Kế Bính

“It has been a long time since anyone has seen a ghost near Mount Buddha. Now is the time of heroes; and ghosts — even invisible ones — no longer belong.”

Nguyễn Khắc Trưởng

The living spirit of the dead tells of a continuity through time. The Sinologist Simon Leys writes that: “Permanence does not deny transformation, but informs it … continuity is not guaranteed by the immutability of inanimate objects, but is achieved in the flow of successive generations.” In the sinicised world, the deceased or the ancestor becomes the object of a cult that creates a link to the living. The life of the dead is the essence of the national community. After 1945, the Vietnamese communist regime never challenged the foundations of popular belief. A number

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2 Nguyễn Khắc Trưởng. Des hommes et autant de fantômes et de sorciers (Men and as many ghosts and sorcerers), p. 15. Taken from the French translation.
of directives did indeed alter the relationship between the new man and the spirits of his ancestors, but the aim was not to completely overturn traditional practices and beliefs. In the late 1940s, the government wanted to simplify traditional rituals without altering the relationship to the deceased. The imported revolutionary praxis did not necessitate a deconstruction of the idea of life after death since no such transition exists in Vietnamese culture. Death is a past and future state. It is a permanence that orders the world of the living and gives it meaning. Any ruling power needed the support of its illustrious spirits to remain in power.

After 1954, ancestor cults held a key political role in the affirmation of the State. The dead were considered in much the same way as they had been during the Nguyễn dynasty, but in the nineteenth century the “cult of outstanding soldiers and citizens needed an official historiography; it was one of the most important parts of government activity.” The dead legitimized the power of the living and imposed order and cohesion on the collective “from the family to the village to the State”, the traditional triptych. The life of the dead represented the hidden side of the reorganisation of society taking place in the 1950s. The DRV thus operated on two levels, overseeing basic human affairs as well of those of the Beyond. In Vietnam the hero or the tutelary spirit was not always chosen posthumously. Exemplary citizens, whether living or dead, had always been honoured by the community for services rendered to the “mother country”. Thus, while the new hero was still alive and active, the world of the dead could not be ignored either. The national martyr (liệt sỹ tổ quốc) was a kind of cultural double of the new patriotic hero. Though stamped with proletarian internationalism, the national martyr also offered a traditional face to protect the “spirit and morals of an ancient people”. DRV leaders wanted to define the title without reference to class, religion, or politics. A glorious death helped to strengthen cohesion in a country with a fractured identity. Unlike the heroes from Tuyên Quang, who were politicised but also culturally exogenous, the national martyr brought together and unified

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4 “After the revolution, new forms of ancestor worship did appear in North Vietnam. But they were pretty neglected during the war due to lack of money and time. We also had a very simple understanding of materialism, and often mixed up ancestor worship and superstition. So when they tore down the temples in Nghệ An in the early 1950s, we raised up our ancestors who helped build the Party; it was a new source of pride for us but didn’t really question anything.” Interview, Vinh, Nghệ An.

the people. In assuming exclusive control over devotional activities, Hồ Chí Minh’s government claimed an unassailable legitimacy. Its policy on martyrs aimed to transform the Head of State into the sole intercessor between the realm of the living and that of the dead. This policy linked the valiant dead, who were both traditional and new heroes, with their doubles from Tuyên Quang in 1952. The life of the dead helped secure the victory of a new dynasty in power.

**Ordering the Dead**

“According to peasant tradition, we honour the men who died for their country, as well as soldiers and disabled veterans, since they exhibited great love for their country. They were the ones who drove out the French, puppet governments, and feudal landlords, and helped increase the mobilisation of the masses, lower land rents, and implement land reform.” The nation’s martyrs generated enthusiasm for the resistance and helped educate the people. For centuries, the State kept guard over these “outstanding spirits” to establish political preeminence over its rivals. Classifying the dead was an ancient practice. The Ministry of Rites (a legacy of Chinese bureaucracy) had been in charge of classifying and ranking patriotic orders of merit since the fifteenth century. These decisions had a direct bearing on society since no death was anonymous, and descendants repositioned themselves socially in light of the ranking. From 1945 to 1956, the DRV simply distinguished between honourable deaths and dishonourable deaths — any soldier who died for a puppet army spread infamy upon his family. Honourable deaths, those who died for the just cause, were then divided into two categories: death on active duty or death in battle. The term liệt sỹ (martyr) was hardly used since it was too similar to tử sĩ (a soldier who fell in battle). In 1951, when the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans issued posthumous certificates to soldiers and officials who had died for their country, all families of tử sĩ were included. This term covered anyone who died while on active duty, be it from an illness, an accident, or as a direct result of combat. Conversely, the term tử trận (killed at war) was more restrictive and referred to men and women who died on the battlefield.

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Until 1955, the government used these terms indiscriminately to classify honourable deaths. They delayed classifying the dead before the summer of 1956, however, so as not to create problems with their influential allies. They tried a first tentative classification campaign within the context of agrarian reform, but the decisions of 1956 imposed a more comprehensive overhaul of the system. Ordering the dead was a cultural act which basically maintained the order of the living. The careful classification of the deceased was now an additional factor in the social positioning of the family and lineage. A new classification of deaths led the DRV to rethink its entire social policy with regards to the according of medals, pensions, and exemptions. They saw these reforms as a way to tighten their grip on the village communities that had been scarred by years of war and division. Their previous attempt to restructure the new society according to social class did not have the desired effect since people were not used to foreign concepts. In 1956, the government needed to consolidate its hold on a divided population, so the question of ordering the dead became a key matter for its propaganda machine. Decree No. 980/Ttg (27 July 1956) and Directive No. 52 (26 October 1956) from the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans created a new classification system: at the top of the ladder sat the figure of national martyr (liệt sĩ tổ quốc), then
came the men who fell while on active duty (quân nhân tử trận), and lastly those missing in action (quân mất tích). After which came the martyr’s family (gia đình liệt sĩ), families of those who died for their country (gia đình tử trận), and finally the families of those missing in action (gia đình mất tích).

The martyr (liệt sĩ) was “someone who had died gloriously in battle after 1925 while fighting imperialism and feudalism”. A glorious death was defined as “dying courageously at the front while defending the work of national revolution”. They chose the date 1925 since that was the year Nguyễn Ái Quốc (Hồ Chí Minh) founded the Thanh Niên (Revolutionary Youth League) in Canton. They made an exception, however, and canonised the young Phạm Hồng Thái as “martyr of the national revolution”, though he had died one year earlier (in 1924) after his assassination attempt on Governor-General Merlin in China. While the term tử sĩ had thus far been used to refer to all of the dead, the martyr of 1956 referred mainly to the “exemplary men” from the revolutionary parties (the ICP, Việt Minh, and VWP). Although in principle the title of martyr was not strictly reserved for Party members — it could also be awarded posthumously to former members of the Nationalist Party of Nguyễn Thái Học who died during the repressions of 1930 — the text of 1956 stated that the nation’s martyrs “must be Party members, members of associations and mass organisations of all revolutionary parties, and all patriotic mass organisations in neighbourhoods and villages”.

Within the community of the dead, martyrs were a patriotic elite made up of exemplary men and women who died for the country’s independence and the affirmation of the communist party. When asked about the criteria for earning this posthumous title, the government offered a tentative response. The death of a martyr resulted from a direct confrontation with the enemy (hand-to-hand combat, bombing, etc.), an attack, or imprisonment by the enemy. Official documents show that cadres and soldiers who had fought for the revolution and died later due to an accident or illness could not be classified as “martyrs”. A document of 27 July 1956 established a list of all those eligible for the title: revolutionary cadres (including those in charge of reducing farm rents and agrarian reform); revolutionary soldiers of the PAVN; members of the Vietnamese

7 Giải thích về tiêu chuẩn liệt sĩ và gia đình liệt sĩ (Explaining the defining criteria of martyrs and families of martyrs), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2232, document no. 50/TTLB, 1957.
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Liberation Army and of the Army of National Salvation; organisations active during World War II in Bác Sơn, Đinh Ca, Trang Xá, Lã Hiền, Đại Tú, Đinh Hoà, and Sơn Dương; combatants with local protection units; members of people’s militia groups; deserving Việt Minh groups in existence before the revolution and guerrilla organisation; workers from the defence sector “who repaired or made weapons and fought to protect their plants during the resistance”; and finally, members of youth groups who fell defending their posts. The 1956 Act stated that in theory no distinction of class, religion, or politics should determine the status of “national martyr”, but the criteria for “special cases” rendered this obsolete. Indeed, when it was time to classify deaths, cadres had to work on a case-by-case basis, carefully noting the deceased’s “religion, ethnicity, activities against the enemy, activities involving the masses, and relationship with the local branch of the Party”. Soldiers, officers, and policemen who did not fall into the category of martyr were granted the posthumous title of “war dead” (tử trận). A directive from the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans of 26 October 1956 states that it was awarded to those who died of an illness or following an accident sustained while on duty.8 The government played on the title’s former prestige to mitigate the disgrace of this second-class posthumous rank. While it used to be reserved only for those who fell on the battlefield, the title’s re-evaluation in 1956 was now so broad that it covered almost all deaths caused even indirectly by the war.9 As a third step, the Ministry created a posthumous title for those missing in action. Unfortunately there are no reliable statistics on exactly how many went missing between 1925 and the early 1960s, but just as an example, the province of Hà Giang recorded 262 “martyr’s families” in 1962, and 80 “families of the missing” who were granted an allowance by the government.

Classifying the dead gave the State an effective way to assert its dominance over the those left behind. It is generally estimated that more than 470,000 Vietnamese died during the Franco-Viet Minh War (1946–1954). In 1962, 11,290 “martyr’s families” received a financial allowance from the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans. Not all family

8 Về việc trợ cấp gia đình liệt sĩ, gia đình quân nhân, cán bộ công nhân, viên chức tử trận, hay mất tích gặp khó khăn trong đời sống (On the support provided to families of martyrs, families of cadres, worker-cadres, and officials who died or disappeared while serving their country), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 886, document no. 1989, 2 April 1962.
9 C.B. (Hồ Chí Minh). “Anh hùng giả và anh hùng thật” (Real and false heroes), Nhân Dân, no. 149, 21 November 1953.
members qualified for this rank, however. The title was restricted to the deceased’s next-of-kin: spouse, immediate offspring (legitimate children), or parents. The government added a few explanatory paragraphs to the legislation in order to avoid an excessive number of beneficiaries, which could lead to political and budgetary ruin. Hence, when the wife of a martyr remarried, his family was no longer automatically entitled to retain the title; it depended on the financial situation of her new husband. Conversely, the former husband of a deceased female martyr could retain his title upon remarrying if he continued to raise the children from his first marriage. When the wife of a martyr lived with her in-laws, they were eligible for the title of “martyr’s family” even though the title really belonged to the wife and children. In the absence of direct descendents, the paternal grandparents of the martyr could also receive the title. Lastly, when a child under 16 (or more if the child was disabled) lost both his parents and grandparents, the person or foster family who saw to the child’s care could be classified as a “martyr’s family”.

The families of the “war dead” and the missing had even more limited access to the posthumous rank. The government took into account the family’s standard of living and required that the deceased to have given at least three years of continuous service during the resistance or five years in peacetime.

**Campaigns for Classifying the Dead**

Posthumous awards or certificates were also a part of Vietnamese tradition. Since 1946, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans had established local branches (within the administrative committees of the military zones and provinces) that were placed in charge of these issues. In 1950, the arrival of Chinese advisers announced a partial reform of the Ministry’s mission. In 1951, the government issued a “certificate from the grateful nation” to everyone who died for their country. In 1952, they added two additional certificates: one “for glorious families” and a “certificate of honour”.¹⁰ The distribution of posthumous certificates was supposed to accompany the campaigns of reclassifying the population, but it became common practice only later and was hardly used before the latter half of the 1950s.

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Posthumous awards situated a family within the new hierarchy of patriotic merit. They were based on lists drawn up by the various military and administrative levels, and validated by the Prime Minister’s office, which officially announced the honours. The certificate was printed on a small rectangular piece of cardboard, $25 \times 40$ cm ($10 \times 16$ in.), and contained the name of the martyr and his job title at the time of death, engraved in black letters on a tri-coloured background (white, red, and gold). The government asked its local branches to use all holidays as an occasion to solemnly distribute the certificate to the families concerned. Granted to all tử sĩ until 1956, the “certificate from the grateful nation” was later only awarded to those with the rank of martyr. The new distinction between the “war dead”, the “missing”, and “martyrs” changed the rules for obtaining the certificate. The “certificate in honour of glorious families” was created in 1952 and was awarded to families who had one member in the Resistance. It was no longer given to those who did not fully qualify as a “martyr’s family”. From 1956, families of the “war dead” or “missing” received second-class certificates, a “certificate in honour of glorious families”, or a “certificate of honour”. This new hierarchy of the dead echoed that of the living under the new regime.

Organising classification campaigns had become a priority, and the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans gave special training to the cadres they sent out into the field. The movement took place over three distinct periods: 1954–56, 1956–59, and 1960–65. During the agrarian reform (1954–56), teams of cadres criss-crossed the nation to implement a reorganisation of society based on class (landless peasants, poor peasants, middle peasants, rich peasants, and landlords). According to official statistics, from 1952 to September 1956, 40 per cent of martyrs and “martyrs’ families” within the PAVN were classified. The second period began in the fall of 1956 and lasted until the end of 1959. At the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of April 1956, the excesses of the agrarian reform were denounced. In September 1956, the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee launched a campaign to rectify past mistakes. Many communes accused the itinerant teams of misclassifying their dead. Local officials complained about the “errors and excesses committed by ‘disabled veterans’ who had been assigned key positions in the village administration by agrarian

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reform teams”, which of course had “a very bad influence on people”. While there have been several studies on the classification of the living, the registry of the dead remains largely unexamined. A certificate of martyrdom brought both prestige and advantage to its recipient, so a classification error could lead to serious problems within a community. Between 1956 and 1959, cadres from the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans re-examined all records, and special cases were carefully reviewed. By 1959, the government had classified more than 60 per cent of the cases concerning martyrs and their families. And finally, the policy that had begun in 1956 was radicalised in 1960. The government confirmed the idea that a martyr was “first and foremost someone chosen for his revolutionary work, and his opposition to imperialism and feudalism, and who fell in battle with glory”. The classification of bereaved families went hand-in-hand with the country’s march towards a socialist economy. The propaganda department praised the families of martyrs, those who died for the nation, the missing, and the disabled “as the purest of all of us, of the Party and the government”.

At the village level, People’s Committees were told to help integrate this new virtuous elite into local cooperatives and mass organisations. For provincial cadres, a list of martyrs’ families became an indispensable political tool for training the people: “Since the return of peace, 350 disabled comrades or family members of martyrs in our province have joined the Party. Eighty per cent of them hold managerial positions in businesses and all of them have joined cooperatives.” By the early 1960s, these families had acquired such important roles in the ideologisation of the countryside and the management of local affairs that the classifying of the dead was no longer done by the local government but directly by the provincial branch of the Party.

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The Course of a Campaign

Let us now examine one of these campaigns in detail, that of Diệ́n Châu district (Nghệ́ An) in 1962. In July 1962, the province sent a group of four officials to the district to oversee registration, under the direction of the Party committee. The People’s Committee of the district invited communal cadres from the area to a briefing to explain the procedure. The communes that were not represented (and there were many that day) would have to be visited without delay by the classifying team. In the villages, the cadre in charge of cultural affairs had to ensure the proper implementation of these guidelines. The cost of organising informational meetings fell on the province. Provincial authorities drew up a calendar of operations: the registration of the population should take place between 26 October and early December, with the closing conference not later than 22 December — the anniversary of the founding of the PAVN.

At the communal level, these campaigns relied heavily on their cooperatives. As the lists were being finalised, the head of the cooperative called upon representatives from the various sectors involved: the Fatherland Front, the office of rural affairs, the youth organisation, and

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16 In 1960, the report by the district of Tiên Lãng (Kiể́n An province) still showed that the district Party committee had greater decision-making power than the administrative branch. See Báo cáo về việc thi hành công tác liệt sĩ của huyện Tiên Lãng (Report on the activities in place for martyrs in the district of Tiên Lãng), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2248, unnumbered document, 15 March 1960.
17 They were briefed on the following questions: “What is a martyr? How can one tell a martyr (liệt sỹ) from someone who died for the country (quân nhân tử trận)?”; “Study of decree 14-CP and circular no. 38–41 on the policy regarding martyrs”; “Study of the principles and criteria for supporting the families and children of martyrs according to directive no. 1162 of June 20, 1961, by the Provincial Committee of Nghệ́ An”; “On the upkeep of martyrs’ cemeteries”; etc., in Báo cáo về việc thi hành công tác liệt sĩ của huyện Tiên Lãng, 30 November 1962, p. 3.
18 The People’s Committee of Nghệ́ An gave the commune of Điện Thịnh 50 đồng to organise these meetings within the allotted time frame. See Báo cáo về việc thi hành công tác liệt sĩ của huyện Tiên Lãng, unnumbered document (UBND tỉnh Nghệ́ An for the district committee of Điện Châu), 30 November 1962, p. 2.
19 AVN3, BNV, file no. 2268, document no. 168 DC-LS, UBHC [administrative committee], Hà Nam province, 20 April 1964.
the provincial departments of health, disabled veterans, and education. In December 1963, cadres in charge of the registration process for Thanh Liêm district (Hà Nam) sent the following assessment to the People’s Committee of the province:20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of “martyrs”</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of “war dead” and “missing”</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of martyr’s families</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of martyr’s children</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of disabled veterans</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of special cases</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of the Classification Campaign, Thanh Liêm (1963)

The report highlighted a number of weaknesses. In Thanh Liêm district, 7 villages still did not have a patriotic cemetery and 19 villages had not enacted special measures for the children and parents of martyrs. In addition, although the government recommended that all communes establish committees to implement these new policies, almost nothing had been done on the ground.

Thanks to reports from these classifying teams, DRV leaders were able to keep abreast of how well the government apparatus was taking hold in the provinces. Classifying a death allowed leaders to extend their reach into the village level. Already on 27 July 1951, the government had published a letter from Hồ Chí Minh encouraging disabled veterans to return to their villages and find work within the local economy.21 The government obviously considered veterans a crucial part of the political and economic mobilisation of the country:

We really must encourage disabled veterans to play a key role in their villages once they get home, in production, in campaigns to reduce land rents, and in land reform. Currently many disabled veterans have already demonstrated strong performance in production, and some of them also

20 Báo cáo công tác Thương binh liệt sĩ (Activity report on disabled veterans and martyrs), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2268, unnumbered document, 30 April 1964.
21 Báo cáo về việc thực hiện chủ trương đồng Thương binh về xã và việc thực hiện chủ trương này đến cuối năm (Report on the treatment of groups of disabled veterans who returned to their communes, and continued treatment of the issue through the end of the year), in AVN3, BTB, file no. 22, document no. 770/TB, 3 June 1952.
occupy key positions in the communal administration. This can surely have a powerful influence on the mobilisation of the people.\textsuperscript{22}

The virtue and legitimacy of the DRV depended on its leaders having a firm grasp on the life of the dead. The policy on martyrs had three main components: establishing a system of financial support for the families of martyrs, combatants who died for their country, the missing, and disabled veterans; providing educational and professional benefits (government jobs) to these families on a quota basis; and granting them exemptions, which reinforced their priority status within society. Since Hồ Chí Minh’s call of 1951, the government stepped up its measures regarding these families.\textsuperscript{23} Agrarian reform cadres sped up the classification of deaths, sometimes committing errors in the process. Registering families helped identify those who were eligible for a posthumous certificate, and also allowed the government to determine the level of pension they were to receive, based on a national scale.

Classification of the dead was also essential for local cadres, who needed to accurately assess how much communal land should be reserved for the families of martyrs. The government’s remuneration policy for its fallen patriots included the allocation of pensions, certificates, and medals. By classifying bereaved families, each province was able to identify the needy families in its jurisdiction. Since February 1947, the DRV had established a pay scale for both disability allowance and pensions for martyrs’ families. The scale was updated in 1956 (Directive No. 980/Ttg of 27 July 1956) and again in 1959 (Directive No. 445/Ttg of 14 December 1959). The government granted pensions to families of: martyrs, those who died during the war, and cadres, workers and other patriots who had died or gone missing since 19 August 1945. The deceased had to have served a minimum number of years in service to the State (military, government, government-assisted organisations, etc.). The text specified that if the deceased had worked less than three years, the martyr’s family could receive only a temporary pension. If he had worked for more than three years,

\textsuperscript{22} Báo cáo của Ban liên lạc Nông dân toàn quốc (Report from the national peasant liaison bureau), in AVN3, BTB, file no. 71a, unnumbered document, 10 July 1954, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{23} In 1952, a document by provincial authorities specified that they must “first bring disabled veterans back to their villages, especially those who could work or had special abilities”. See Báo cáo về việc ngày Thưởng binh liệt sĩ Từ sĩ từ đầu năm 1951 ở Quảng Trị (Activity report on the day of disabled veterans and martyrs in 1951 in Quảng Trị), in AVN3, BTB, file no. 22, document no. 749, 2 April 1952.
the government support (pension or basic living expenses) would be more long-term (one year, renewable every year). The pension could not be paid until after the certificate of patriotism had been issued. How much support a family received depended on their economic circumstances, and government aid could last from three months to one year, and was renewable. The Ministry cautioned against monthly disbursements (often made directly in kind), and suggested that the aid be distributed three times per year. The distribution took place during Vietnamese holidays (traditional festivals and patriotic holidays).

Since the end of the war, pensions came out of the provincial budget, but authorities frequently had to ask the central government for help due to a lack of funds. Financial aid from multiple sources was not allowed (from both the commune and the province, for example), and families who lost more than one person were not allowed to receive more than a certain amount (set at thirty dông per month in 1962). For example, a peasant “father of a martyr” who was too old to work was paid 7.5 dông per month by the cooperative of his commune in 1962. In theory, he could not receive additional support from the State. In practice, however, if the communal authorities deemed it necessary, they could grant him additional aid “to help him get by”. In this way, pensions were often accompanied by financial aid from the commune. Land reform had also authorised the re-distribution of village land to exemplary citizens and their families. In 1963, land redistribution campaigns were carried out in Mỹ Haucoup district (Nghệ An province). Official documents refer to more than 1,000 mâu (about 3,600 m², or slightly less than one acre) of arable land that was shared between the deserving families of the area. Local governments had been told to highlight these exemplary households back in 1957–59 during the creation of village cooperatives, and the cooperative’s management committee played a key role in disseminating these policies. Families of the dead or disabled had to set an example for the rest of the village. The People’s Committee gave extra points to families who joined cooperatives, and communal cadres came by in the winter to bring them warm clothes. Cooperatives were also responsible for feeding the children of martyrs and distributing extra rations of rice to needy families. This communal aid was in addition to the funds issued by the State two or three times a year. By funding pensions, the central government proved its filial devotion to the people, while aid on the communal level showed the local government’s responsibility and duty toward its disadvantaged citizens.

After 1951, campaigns encouraged disabled veterans to return to their villages and promised aid for their reintegration into the economy and
community in exchange for “good patriotic behaviour”. This basically meant preferential treatment by the local government. The People’s Committee of Hải Thành (Quảng Trị province), for example, gave a six-rière paddy and a water buffalo to their returning veterans to help them get back to work, and their files were given priority during emulation campaigns. In 1953–54, the village of Hoàng Khai (Tuyên Quang province) only nominated disabled veterans for the title of agricultural emulation fighter. Positions within the local government were reserved for disabled veterans and members of “martyrs’ families”. The government encouraged these practices. They followed the track record of each family, their ranking in the hierarchy of bereaved homes, and what type of aid they had already received. The government read their medical records (the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans had created an “injury scale” for this purpose) and then decided whether to promote them, send them to a convalescent home, or sign them up for further education. From 1950 to 1960, the DRV offered model citizens “who had special skills, a good outlook, and the desire to serve the people, the revolution and socialism” the chance to pursue higher education. The children of martyrs and disabled veterans were automatically exempted from paying tuition and received a stipend based on their financial situation. In the countryside, the Party encouraged them to pursue further training and the Ministry of the Interior urged every level of the government to “help the children of martyrs find work”.

The impact of this preferential treatment on the cohesion of the Vietnamese village was subject to numerous confidential reports. In 1958, a report by the Provincial People’s Committee of Lào Cai criticised the excesses of the exemption policy at the village level: “If we continue this way, we risk creating serious rivalries between the cadres of the commune. Classification operations will then become a very delicate affair.”

25 In 1965–66, Minister of Education Tạ Quang Bửu (1910–1986) even proposed giving martyrs’ children extra points on their university exams (1 to 2 diêm).
26 Báo cáo về phổ biến điều lệ huy động và sử dụng dân công Hội nghị của tỉnh (Report on spreading the rules of mobilisation and making use of the provincial conference on collective work sessions), in AVN3, BLD, file no. 414, document 939/DC (UBND Lào Cai), 7 June 1958.
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(population of 1,185) was exempt from corvée obligations as a result of the “martyr policy”. Although the accusations were mainly against communal cadres who took advantage of the exemptions themselves, these reports primarily blamed excesses in the classification campaigns. Errors were committed during the campaign to rectify land reform in 1956–57, but mistakes like these were common in a rural society. Fighting the foreign invader was a good impetus to mobilise the population during the Franco-Viet Minh war, but the construction of socialism was far more abstract in the peasant mentality. The government ensured its presence and control over the people through the material encouragement of its most loyal citizens (honours, pensions, exemptions, etc.):

Throughout history the Vietnamese people have been stimulated by self-interest. Material gain is a natural motivating force in a poor country. It was hard to satisfy the people so we had to try different things. We couldn’t ask as much of them in peacetime (1955–1964) as we could during the war, since honour and patriotic selflessness were much weaker then, so material interest could help us enhance these moments.  

Socialism was no longer just an abstraction but offered a real improvement in the standard of living to those loyal to the nation.

The Day of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans

In June 1947, the DRV designated 27 July as a new holiday dedicated to martyrs and disabled veterans. Hồ Chí Minh made the symbolic gesture of giving one month’s salary to disabled veterans. July 27 would be the image of a new national solidarity, as he explained: “You know I have no children. The Vietnamese nation is my family. All young Vietnamese are actually my children. When one of them dies, it’s as if I have lost someone in my own family. They die so that our homeland can live forever;
their souls will live forever in the spirit of Vietnam.” The martyr was the glue that held the nation together, and 27 July would keep the martyr’s spirit alive in the minds of the people. Each level of government was to “encourage, praise the accomplishments of disabled veterans and martyrs’ families, and applaud them whenever they take part in the movement”. Through this patriotic fellowship honouring the dead, the government counted on winning people over to its political agenda.

In May 1947, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans sent information to all provincial People’s Committees in the country on how to organise this new national day of remembrance. Provincial cadres “oversaw the district and communal committees to help them successfully carry out this highly important task”. In mid-June, communal People’s Committees held talks with villagers to explain the nature of this new patriotic holiday. A collection was then taken up in each commune to buy gifts for needy families. Both the national and provincial press published special issues on the subject, the radio broadcast the central government’s text on air, and provincial cultural departments created cultural shows and events.

In 1948, short patriotic emulation sessions were scheduled to bring the organisation to a close on time. Meanwhile, communal cadres and representatives of mass organisations had to study official documents after work. Provincial authorities prepared rewards and gifts for the participants, and local artists and performers were called upon to put on shows. In early July, plays, songs, and exhibits were presented to explain the importance of the new holiday. In July 1952, in Tuyên Quang, mass organisations from the province attracted more than 1,200 people for a painting exhibition held by the provincial artistic department. The Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans felt this was insufficient, however, and were afraid that the low turn-out “could potentially have a negative influence on

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30 A document from the People’s Committee of Thái Nguyên province shows that in 1951 four of the districts in the area had in fact established organisation committees in time: Phú Bình (26 June), Đạ Tứ (30 June), Minh Hóa (5 July), and Định Hóa (5 July), in AVN3, file no. 22, document no. 38, Thái Nguyên, 17 January 1952. As for the Việt Bắc, the provinces of Hải Ninh, Hồng Gai, Lào Cai, Sơn La, Tuyên Quang, and Vĩnh Phúc still had not formed organisation committees by 30 September 1951, in AVN3, file no. 22, document no. 38, Thái Nguyên, unnumbered document LK/VB, January 1952.
the masses”. At the village level, mass organisations coordinated the activities. The children of Thiếu Nhi [Young Pioneers] sang songs honouring the nation’s patriots in their hamlets, waving banners bearing the national campaign slogan: “Remember martyrs and be grateful to disabled veterans.”

On 27 July they went around to every home to collect money, goods, or clothing to hand out to bereaved families. Teen members of the Thanh Niên also took part in this patriotic remodelling of inter-generational solidarity. They were divided into groups and put in charge of maintaining cemeteries, memorials, and martyrs’ graves. Communal leaders attached great importance to this maintenance and restoration. Women’s Associations and the “Mothers of Combatants” were also mobilised to visit the families of martyrs and disabled veterans to “comfort them and show them that the State and the Party cared about them”. These pioneering women encouraged the villagers to write — or, more often, to have someone write for them — letters to active-duty soldiers and sponsor soldiers who were far from home. Finally, the Peasants’ Association urged its members to go to the rice paddies of those who had suffered a loss and help them with their work.

To thank the State for its help, bereaved families pledged their loyalty to the Party in return.

Martyrs and Disabled Veterans Day took root slowly in North Vietnam. Despite encouragement from government ministries, annual reports from local authorities reported delays. In the isolated and mountainous areas of the country, local officials “faced many difficulties in organising the

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31 The province provided them with posters, tracts, and banners. On 27 July 1951, for example, the province of Quảng Trị distributed 1,000 small posters bearing the campaign slogan, 7,600 tracts with songs for martyrs, 1,000 copies of official texts, 500 appeals from the province, and 20,000 patriotic tracts, in AVN3, BTB, file no. 22, document no. 749, 2 April 1952.

32 For 27 July 1951, the amounts collected in the Việt Bắc varied by province: Cao Bằng: 4,479,774 đồng; Lạng Sơn: 5,580,774; Phú Thọ: 1,350,982; Tuyên Quang: 1,558,401; Thái Nguyên: 7,581,152; Bác Ninh: 1,762,450; Hpeaker: 55,950; Lào Cai: 2,851,660; Quảng Yên: 2,825,790; Vĩnh Phúc: 394,400; Yên Bái: 549,161; and Hà Giang: 1,798,098. Báo cáo ngày 27.7.1951 Liên khu Việt Bắc (Report on 27 July 1951 in the zone of the Việt Bắc) in AVN3, BTB, file no. 22, document no. 674 YB/5, 5 April 1952.

33 Reports by the district People’s Committees show the limits of the campaign. In the province of Hải Dương in 1954, for example, the mother of a newly decorated martyr found herself alone with eight sâu of rice paddy to cultivate. With no-one to help her, she had to hire a day-worker. The writer of the report implies that this was due to a lack of social support available to martyrs’ families. See Báo cáo về ngày 27.7.1961 (Report on 27 July 1961), in AVN3, BTH, file no. 71a, document no. 34/HD, 1954.
new movement of solidarity as per national guidelines”. In Bắc Giang, in 1954, provincial groups in charge of the holiday in the villages of Tân Hiền and Tân Hiệp were discouraged: “There still isn’t any real awareness in these communes, and it’s often hard to find people to help organise the structures we are trying to create.” But every June, each province selected representatives among the families of martyrs and disabled veterans and sent them to the national conference, organised and attended by members of the Politburo and the government. In 1955, a newly created Provincial Committee for Reunification was tasked with choosing exemplary families and sending the list to the central government. These families were given financial support (to cover their transport costs, food, and accommodation) so that they could “bring their congratulations” to President Hồ and the government on behalf of their province.

Come 27 July a conference was held in each provincial capital with central government officials, the executive committees of mass organisations, Party representatives, and several new “martyrs’ families”. In Kiên An in 1954, 64 disabled veterans, 5 bereaved families, and 5 people from “foster families of disabled orphans” were invited. The day began with a general overview of the nation’s political and economic situation and continued with the reading of patriotic poems. At Kiên An, as in all provincial capitals that year, cadres shouted out poems written in honour of national martyrs by Hồ Chí Minh, Vũ Đình Tùng (Minister for Martyrs

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34 Chương trình kế hoạch công tác liệt sĩ làm điểm ở Mộc Châu (Provisional programme for activities regarding martyrs in Mộc Châu), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2248, document no. 1537, 25 October 1960.
36 Provincial committees did not always live up to the Ministry’s expectations. The People’s Committee of Cao Bằng, for example, announced to the central government in early June 1962 that they had only chosen one family. They chose Lý Việt Dân (from the hamlet of Nà Châu, Độc Lập commune, Quảng Uyen district), whose son Lý Văn Mưu had died at Đồng Khê in 1950 and was awarded “hero of the armed forces” in 1956. See Thông tri về Tổ chức hội nghị Thương binh liệt sĩ (Directive on organising the commission on disabled veterans and martyrs), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2253, document no. 11927, 20 August 1962.
37 AVN3, BNV, file no. 2253, document no. 03 TB/NA, December 22, 1954. A document from 1961 states that the organisational committee gave 1.20 đồng per day to each participant (for food and lodging), on top of their transport. See AVN3, BNV, file no. 2253, document no. 349, 19 January 1961.
and Disabled Veterans), leaders of the military zone, and scholars from the local people’s militia. Representatives of disabled veterans and families of martyrs were then invited to share their experiences:

They got up to talk about their lives, about their youth, courage, and the fatherland. Nguyễn Văn Ưy from Hùng Thắng commune took the floor first. He explained to the audience how he had been awarded the title of exemplary cadre of the first rank in 1952. He was awarded the title a second time by the district due to his volunteer work in tax collection, and again by the provincial administration in 1953. He explained that he had done it all simply because it was his duty, the duty of every disabled veteran, to take part in the Vietnamese revolutionary movement with the greatest enthusiasm.38

The day was organised differently around the country. At Hải Dương, the conference hosted 78 delegates from 5 of its 6 districts. 52 communes had previously organised talks that were attended by almost 4,500 people, according to official statistics. Village debates attracted a record 40 to 100 people, and the commune held nearly 555 public meetings in memory of martyrs during the month, another record. In Hà Tĩnh, however, results were not as promising. The provincial committee noted with resignation that “the July 27 program was fully applied only in Đức Thọ”.39 Note, however, that in late 1954 the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans had only fragmentary information about what had actually taken place. In North Vietnam, only the provinces of Phú Thọ, Tuyên Quang, Thanh Hóa, Hà Tĩnh, Bắc Giang, Thái Nguyên, Hải Dương, Kiến An, Thái Bình, and Nghệ An had submitted their report on the day’s events.

Back in Hanoi, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans drew up a schedule of official visits. In July 1959, five groups were established, including a number of senior officials, plus Hồ Chí Minh, Lê Duẩn, Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Hùng, Defence Minister Võ Nguyên Giap, and Tôn Đức Thắng, Chairman of the Reunification Committee. Hồ’s delegation visited the imposing Mai Dịch martyrs’ cemetery, located a few kilometres from the capital. The second group visited a camp for the blind, a typing

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38 Báo về việc Tổ chức liên hoan Thương binh và gia đình quân nhân liệt sỹ trong dịp kỷ niệm Thương binh toàn quốc (Report on the organisation of festivities for disabled veterans and families of martyrs for the national day of remembrance for disabled veterans), in AVN3, BTB, file no. 7, document no. 3587 vx/ka, 23 October 1954.
school for the handicapped, a military field hospital, and a boarding school for the children of martyrs in Vĩnh Phú. The third team went further east into Hải Dương province, where they met with a group of disabled farmers from the village of Đồng Triệu and a “martyr’s family” that had been pre-selected by local authorities. The fourth delegation visited a large camp for disabled veterans located two kilometres from the town of Bác Ninh, followed by a “martyr’s family” and the family of a disabled combatant. The fifth delegation had left Hanoi the day before to visit two camps for disabled veterans, one in Thanh Hóa province (two kilometres from the village of Thanh Hóa) and the other farther west, in Vinh (Nghệ An), before ending the day with a visit to the agricultural cooperative in Lý Thanh and to the families of a martyr and a disabled veteran. The government recommended that:

its delegations have cordial discussions with all of the disabled veterans and families they meet during their visits. They should remind them that the government expects them to do serious work and be enthusiastic in their studies. Families of disabled veterans and the elderly must also be strongly encouraged to enthusiastically take part in work production. Finally, all delegations must remember to offer small gifts and have their picture taken with their hosts.\(^{40}\)

Throughout the district and the commune, cadres organised personalised visits. At the village level, People’s Committees asked the members of local mass organisations to form small delegations to visit the homes of the bereaved families. At all levels, these meetings had to retain a formal character while allowing for “frank and cordial discussions that would show the people how much the VWP and the government cared about the people”.\(^{41}\) During their visits, delegations handed out small gifts (food, medicine, clothing, or money) to show the government’s concern for them. Village cadres then went to the town cemetery to lay a wreath of flowers.

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\(^{40}\) Kế hoạch tổ chức Đoàn đại biểu Đảng, Chính phủ và các đoàn thể Trung ương đi viếng Nghĩa trang Mai Dịch và thăm thương binh, gia đình liệt sĩ ngày 27.7.1959 (Preparation by delegations from the Party, the government, and mass organisations from the central government for visits to the cemetery of Mai Dịch and meetings with the families of disabled veterans and martyrs, 27 July 1959), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 32/TB, 18 July 1959.

\(^{41}\) Thông tri về tổ chức Ngày thương binh liệt sĩ 27.7 1954 (Circular on the organisation of the day of disabled veterans and martyrs on 27 July 1954), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2244, document no. 9132, 13 July 1959.
Invoking the spirits of the dead was a way to glorify the families that had lost a member. Official documents explained that “it was absolutely essential to show that a family could acquire real honour within their community”.

A wreath was placed at the foot of the central stele, then discussions were held between veterans and the young pioneers and school children of the village. The government encouraged people to spend the day, or even just the afternoon, helping disabled veterans and families of martyrs “without, however, unduly neglecting their own work”. In some villages, “rice for solidarity” initiatives were organised for the needy, while processions were organised in others. According to official figures, 15,000 people took part in these celebrations in Hanoi in 1962, and 3,000 seats were reserved at the cinema for disabled veterans and the families of martyrs.

The DRV took advantage of the holiday to distribute medals and patriotic certificates. In 1950, the government had created a patriotic title destined solely for the disabled, and these decorations were handed out informally as cadres made their rounds among the families. Some communes, however, made the closing proceedings of 27 July into a more solemn event. It should be recalled that families attending these public meetings were traditionally given financial compensation from the government. The practice, both common and long-standing in Vietnam, played an important role in mobilising poor families who were unaccustomed to this type of attention. The compensation was not much, but its main purpose was to show the State’s homage and gratitude.

In 1960, anyone who attended a government meeting received at least 0.20 đồng (on top of food, lodging, and transport). See Kế hoạch kỷ niệm thương binh liệt sĩ ở Hà Nội (Organisation of commemorations for disabled veterans and martyrs), in AVN3, DNV, file no. 2258, unnumbered document, 9 June 1960.
Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam

Boudarel dubbed “meetingitis”— for material rather than ideological reasons? These financial benefits gave rise to dependency relationships, which did not cause any moral problems to either the State or the people. The government’s genius was to have normalised the traditional relation of gift/counter-gift to its advantage. The new distribution of gifts was the revenge of those who had been overlooked by the old regime and showed in a good light the relatively modest payments of the current government compared to the excesses of the past. For the common people, the meeting represented a moment of communion with the political authorities during which, dressed in their finest clothes, they showed their respect for the current government. In exchange, the government affixed its counter-signature on this symbolic transfer of power via the bestowing of gifts.

Patriotic Cemeteries

In 1954, 42 per cent of the DRV’s social welfare budget was spent on benefits, pensions, and the building of rest camps and cemeteries, for a total of 4.8 billion dông. During the Franco-Vietminh war, the term nghĩa địa (literally “homage to the earth”) was used to designate funeral plots on public communal land. In the early 1950s, the government adopted a new term, nghĩa trang liệt sĩ, specifically for “martyr’s cemeteries”: “The term nghĩa địa was replaced by nghĩa trang liệt sĩ due to the strong cultural connotation of the latter. A nghĩa trang liệt sĩ commanded even greater respect. The word implied a sense of elevation, and its use somehow evoked a greater sense of the beautiful.” Before the outbreak of war in 1964, the Ministry for Martyrs and Disabled Veterans counted a total of 1,975 communal cemeteries, 13 “intermediate” cemeteries, and 8 cemetery complexes dedicated to the great battles of the Franco-Vietminh war.

The creation of patriotic cemeteries created two types of problems. First, who could be buried there? Could they bury someone who had not performed any heroic acts? This was all up to the central government. The Ministries of Labour and of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans — taking over from the Ministry of Rites in the old regime — were responsible for making


46 It is interesting to note that the image of the corrupt mandarin reappears in a number of literary works published in North Vietnam in the 1950s.

47 Interview, Hanoi.
Figure 17. Monument to the Martyred Dead, Vĩnh Phú province
Figure 18. Monument to the Martyred Dead, Cao Bằng province
Figure 19. Gates of the cemetery at the Tỉnh Túc mine

Figure 20. Tomb of the labour hero Cao Lực, Nghệ An province
the selection. To this end, cadres re-examined the death certificates issued by military units for the Department of Defence. Within the context of its “reform of society”, the government took charge of funerary rituals. It now covered the funeral expenses of those who died for their country, which was normally a heavy financial burden. Now these families only had to send a file to the provincial People’s Committee and the burial ceremony was taken care of. The government established a file to classify the bereaved family and was thus able to decide where the deceased should be buried. The second issue raised by the new patriotic cemeteries stemmed from a confrontation between the political agenda and village customs. For centuries, funeral plots were strictly demarcated on public communal land. In the early 1950s, the central government made a unilateral decision to build the martyrs’ cemeteries on collective land or on land confiscated from “traitors and landlords” during agrarian reform. However, creating these “gardens of heroism” meant physically moving existing graves. The village dead had to be classified, then exhumed and reburied in the patriotic cemetery. But Vietnamese tradition imposed strict rules on the removal of a body after burial. Luckily for the government, reburial was traditionally scheduled to be carried out three years after death, whereby the body was moved from its temporary location (determined by a geomancer) to the family plot within the commune. The DRV based the success of its cemetery programme on this ritual of the “second burial” (cải táng):

If the family agrees to participate in the program to relocate graves before that date, then the local government may initiate the operation. However, if they are reluctant to do so, we cannot do anything. We have to show respect for local customs. Even if there are some things we cannot accept, and it would be better to rise above costly backward customs, all we can do is explain the benefits of Directive No. 252 (22/9/1958) on the relocation of graves.

The government waited until the third anniversary of the end of the war against France in 1957 to begin building martyrs’ cemeteries throughout the country. The traditional local custom made this an obvious choice.

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49 *Chí thị về tích cực thực hiện những công tác còn lại trong mộ mà* (Instructions for organising the remaining work to do on tombs), in AVN3, BNV, file no. 2246, document no. 22/VG, 14 October 1959.
As war with the South approached, the DRV continued to mobilise the population using a mix of individual and collective interest. In September 1963, the Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Veterans presented an initial assessment of its policy:

The activities put into place for families of martyrs and disabled veterans contributed greatly to increased production in the cooperatives. They encouraged their children to do their military service and support Party and State policies. Many young and older people have enrolled in new training programs. The consequences of this policy are very important for the masses and for the love of the fatherland. It is a good way to honour the revolutionary spirit of the country.50

To gain popular support, the North Vietnamese press contrasted the DRV’s policy of national solidarity to the negligence and anarchy of the Southern regime of Ngô Đình Diệm (1955–1963). The policy on martyrs played an important role in the “mobilisation of hearts”. In Vietnam, a nation that took care of its dead fulfilled a divine duty, thereby earning an inalienable virtue. As the regime slowly freed itself from the sphere of Maoist influence and as war drew near, the central government sought the best way to assert its control over the people. In the early 1960s, the DRV fortified the resistance with regiments of men and ghosts, and hordes of peasants and vengeful spirits.