

Anatomy of US and South Korean Massacres in the Vietnamese Year of the Monkey, 1968

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Summary: What happened in My Lai in March 1968 is remembered in the outside world as one of the most tragic episodes of the Vietnam War. However this was not an isolated event and should be considered in relation to other similar incidents of mass civilian killings. This essay investigates the Vietnam War's history of village massacres, including those by US forces and South Korean forces, and how these catastrophic events are remembered in the affected communities.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first lunar month of 1968, the Year of the Monkey, Ha My, a small coastal settlement of Quang Nam Province in central Vietnam, suffered the shattering tragedy of surrendering an entire village population to a crime of war. This was the time of the Tet Offensive, when practically the entire countryside in southern and central Vietnam became a "free-fire zone," meaning that any objects within it were designated as legitimate targets of destruction in response to the nationwide assaults by the communist

forces against the urban areas controlled by South Vietnam and its allies. A month after this incident, a similar tragedy happened in the neighboring province of Quang Ngai, later known to the international community as the My Lai Massacre.

These two incidents were only a small part of the gigantic human catastrophe that devastated Vietnam in the second half of the 1960s. A systematic mass civilian killing by ground troops swept across a vast area of the central region, and indiscriminate bombing of populated areas became routine. The massacres in Ha My and My Lai were closely connected, and their connectedness was at once regional and global in scope. Two key military allies to the former South Vietnam, the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK), were responsible for the atrocities. The massacre in Ha My is among numerous incidents of mass killing in central Vietnam perpetrated by the South Korean expeditionary forces from 1966 to 1969 and little noticed by international historians of the war. It took place on February 25, 1968, according to the Western calendar, shortly after the Fifth U.S. Marine regiment had handed security responsibility for the village area to their Korean colleagues.[1]

My Lai also suffered devastation related to a changeover of troops. On March 16, 1968, three platoons of Task Force Barker closed in on the area of My Lai from three directions and forced the villagers to assemble at three locations. Just before this operation that resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, “the area circled in red ink under the special duty of Brigade 2, South Korean Marine from January 1967 to December 31, 1967 was handed over to Task Force Barker, Brigade 11, Americal Division from the above mentioned time.”[2]

The connectedness of these incidents was not limited within the dynamic theater of a territorial war but had a global dimension. This was not merely because the guilty were international actors coming from East and West. The crimes were inseparable from the bipolar geopolitical structure and the interstate network dominant at the time that we call the Cold War. The structure is what brought the two (and other) international actors together in the name of a crusade against communism and the network is what ultimately drove the minor actor, which some earlier observers called “America’s rented troops,” to be more active in violent village pacification operations than the dominant one without attracting attention from the international community.[3]



ROK military-political leader Park Chung-hui and US President Kennedy discuss US support for South Korea’s economic development plan and South Korea’s military support for US actions in South Vietnam during their meeting in Washington D.C., November 1961.



US President Johnson and ROK President Park discuss rising tensions between North and South Korea and military progress in South Vietnam during their meeting in Honolulu, April 1968.

The civilian massacres during the

Vietnam War may be divided into two distinct, though related, patterns. In one type of killing that was widespread, the scale of violence was relatively limited and the victims were predominantly elders and small children. The massacres in two neighboring villages of Ha My, Ha Gia and Ha Quang, fall into this category, as do numerous other incidents that occurred in Quang Nam in 1968 and Quang Ngai in 1966. The circumstances of these killings, although they vary, demonstrate one commonality. In Ha Gia and Ha Quang, by the time the mass killings took place most villagers had been relocated to refugee camps called “strategic hamlets” or had moved to urban slums. Those who remained in the village were mainly elders who maintained the rice paddies and vegetable plots in the absence of their families.

In 1966, in the Binh Son district of Quang Ngai province, local militiamen were consolidated with expeditionary units of the regular North Vietnamese forces. This large fighting force relied partly on the scattered, barely populated villages for food and information. In a number of cases that I investigated, the remaining elders had either children or close relatives working in the local partisan force, and thus they stayed on to keep in touch with them as well as supply them with food. After a successful action against the enemy, the militia in Quang Ngai temporarily evacuated the area and encouraged villagers to do likewise. They knew that post-ambush retaliatory acts against civilians had become routine by

the summer of 1966. Many village elders were unable to evacuate the village even temporarily, however, either because they had nowhere else to go or they had never gone beyond the boundary of their village before and were reluctant to leave. In the case of Ha Gia, a neighbor of Ha My, some of the elderly victims were old Viet Minh activists and longtime supporters of the nationalist movement against the French. Their children and grandchildren were moving back and forth between the village and the refugee camp, whenever the situation allowed, to help on the family farm. In most cases of what Noam Chomsky calls “the 43-plus My Lais of the South Korean mercenaries,” the search-and-destroy missions conducted by America’s closest allied troops attacked these relatively small groups of villagers.[4]

The other type of civilian massacre is related to the first but nevertheless differs in one crucial aspect. In 1972, the American Quaker aid workers Diane Jones and Michael Jones collected information on mass killing of civilians, particularly the incidents committed by ROK (Republic of Korea) forces in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam provinces. They reported that more than one hundred civilians were reported killed in thirteen of more than forty-five incidents in which ROK soldiers were said to have killed groups of more than twenty unarmed civilians.[5] The massacres in Ha My and My Lai belong to the category of the thirteen large-scale killings, as do the incidents in Thuy Bo, Phong Nhat, and Phong Nhi of Quang Nam; Phuc Binh of

Quang Ngai; five villages in Binh Dinh province; and many more.[6] If the situation in a village remained stable, the villagers in the refugee camps usually began to visit their homes more frequently and to extend the duration of their visits. Ha My villagers did this, and so did the people of My Lai toward the end of 1967. Their returns were often facilitated by the presence of strong South Vietnamese or other allied forces in the surrounding area. The U.S. military installation in My Khe, south of My Lai, and the ROK Marines in the Con Ninh base in Ha My contributed to the improvement of security in each area. When they thought their villages were secure, the refugees petitioned the South Vietnamese administration, or went directly to the foreign military authority, in the hope of obtaining permission for more extensive visits to or temporary resettlement in their homeland. If these appeals were unsuccessful, the villagers could mobilize resources to bribe the camp authority and other Vietnamese officials to allow them to leave the camp. When some villagers escaped the refugee camp in this way, their escape stirred other villagers. When two or three families successfully returned to their natal village, others watched for and analyzed carefully any information from the village. When family elders and community leaders came to the conclusion that their village was safe, this triggered a mass return to the village. This happened in Ha My in December 1967 and in My Lai shortly before then.

When villagers began to resettle, local

allied troops often assisted their resettlement with food and building materials. Ha My villagers received assistance from the ROK Marines in this way, and the returnees to My Lai considered the U.S. soldiers in My Khe to be friends. This relationship explains why some Ha My villagers believed that the roundup on the day of the massacre was for food distribution. In Phong Nhi of Quang Nam, the villagers and the locally based U.S. Marines maintained a close relationship throughout 1966-1967. Thirty-six families from this village had members who were soldiers in the South Vietnamese army, and ten of these men, according to a surviving veteran still living in the village, were working under the Combined Action program to protect the local area jointly with a group of U.S. Marines. This did not prevent the village from being completely ransacked by a separate, mobile action of pacification in March 1968.

Inside the refugee camps, there were South Vietnamese police informers as well as covert civilian agitprop activists loyal to the communist side. The former disseminated information about violent situations in the rural area and instigated fear; the Vietcong (VC) activists fought this psychological war with counterinformation.[7] Both forms of information were often exaggerated and unreliable. The VC encouraged the refugees to return to their village and to stop, according to a widely disseminated wartime adage, "eating the enemy's food and grabbing America's leg." A covertly delivered communique asserted that

villagers should join other safe villages, if they were not able to return to their own village, to help the partisan forces and also to demonstrate their will against forced displacement. When this failed to persuade anxious villagers, the message became more blunt—“My Lai has many shelters and plenty of food. Move your family to this good place”—as a former covert civilian activist at Quang Ngai recalled.

This war of false information instigated confusion and insecurity among displaced villagers. In the highly unstable military situation after the Tet (Lunar New Year) offensive in the first quarter of 1968, safety of any rural village was a fantasy. The pattern of war-making was changing rapidly on both sides and at great speed. The machinery of war was becoming increasingly centralized on both sides of the frontier, and the fate of a given locality was increasingly unpredictable in a strategic shift “to direct the brunt of the revolutionary war onto the cities, towns, market places, and the leading departments of the enemy.”[8] At the same time, countermeasures urged, “We must win the race to the countryside, go on the offensive, re-establish security in the rural areas, and restore the [Saigon] government’s presence in the villages.”[9] In the midst of this generalized uncertainty, some places were considered to be relatively safe, and these places attracted temporary settlers from other villages. People of “return villages” were proud of their privilege and often provoked envy in people from other, less fortunate villages. This luck,

however, could turn into devastating misfortune. The apparent relative safety of a village frequently led to tragedy of greater proportions. The “safe village” and the “return village” could turn into a site of mass death when the identity of the village suddenly shifted and it became a “VC village” circled in red on the battle map. This shift in identity was abrupt, unknown to the inhabitants, outside their control, and often, in fact, outside the control of the armed combatants on both sides.



Memorial in My Lai dedicated to 504 victims of the 1968 massacre, including 135 victims from the Tu Cung village.



Memorial in Ha My to 135 victims of the 1968 massacre.
Completed in December 2000, the monument was dedicated to the village by a group of ROK Vietnam War veterans.

A brief history

There were three military installations in the vicinity of Ha My. One of them, called Con Ninh, changed hands several times. Before it was temporarily abandoned in 1954, a French battalion camped inside its tall barb-wired wall, hidden from view by a wide stretch of pine trees. When it prospered, Con Ninh was a fairly cosmopolitan place where the French ate French food, Algerians cooked their spicy meals, Moroccans baked their tasty

bread, and local Vietnamese conscripts prepared fish-sauce meals and baked French bread, and fried flying fish for the French officers. Catholics, Muslims, and ancestor worshippers conducted worship ceremonies separately, and some local conscripts debated the strength of the gods and deities in each belief according to the proportional number of casualties in each culturally distinctive group of combatants. This French battalion conducted mopping-up operations in the surrounding villages, and murdered several groups of civilians during the final phase. Rhetorically, it was a defense against communist expansion; in reality it was a colonial reconquest.[10]

In March 1965, the first U.S. expeditionary force, the Third Marine Amphibious Force, landed at Da Nang. The marine battalions quickly began to pacify surrounding villages. This activity typically consisted of surrounding a village in the early morning; dropping leaflets from the air that instructed the villagers to assemble and go through a screening procedure; and advancing into villages to locate any underground tunnels, hidden arms, or food caches. The identification of Vietcong militia was a primary objective of this pacification activity. The activity may have appeared rational and workable to military planners, but, on the ground, it was unrealistic, and the screening procedure was generally based on hunches. Jonathan Schell, reporting from central Vietnam, described this work. He quotes an experienced foreign interrogator who stated, "The V.C. organizes an

association for everyone—the Farmers’ Association, the Fishers’ Association, the Old Grandmothers’ Association. They’ve got one for everybody. It’s so mixed up with the population you can’t tell who’s a V.C. Our job is to separate the V.C. from the people.”[11] Beginning in the dry season of 1965–1966, the U.S. Marines began to move southward to occupy the Hoa Vang and Dien Ban districts (south of Da Nang) and to transform this area into a “white buffer zone,” clear of Vietcong influence. They took control of the old French Con Ninh base on the seashore of Ha My in the spring of 1966.[12]

By this time, Ha My and other villages in the environs had developed complex resistance networks. When a North Vietnamese regular army unit assaulted the provincial capital, Hoi An, with artillery fire in early 1965, local guerilla units, formed mainly by the villagers, launched an offensive against South Vietnamese positions and the suburban residence and offices of government officials.[13] Two years before, Ha My villagers had been at the forefront of the synchronized mass protests against the development of strategic hamlets. If a communal decision in favor of political action was made at that time in a meeting at the village’s communal house, it was very difficult to reverse. People aware of this irreversibility then started to focus on how to minimize risk. If the stakes were high, in the sense that the pressure on the village’s honor was strong, influential people in the village were sometimes obliged to volunteer for

more risky activities. The village men discussed with their relatives the survival of their families in the event of arrest or death, and village women formed their own anxious circles, sharing the grim prospect and discussing strategies for survival without their men.

The situation in each village was swiftly conveyed to other communes and villages. The party activists were informed via a complex chain of *co so cach mang*, or “the infrastructure of revolution,” which refers to the covert civilian activists in the occupied zones. The collected information was relayed to the provincial revolutionary committee through an equivalent organizational network at the interdistrict level. Based on historical affinity, however, Ha My and other villages nearby had a strong network of their own, and they continued to share information and resources. The work of this cross-village network remained largely independent of the political authorities. Peoples from different villages collaborated and communicated through kinship and marriage connections, and these connections changed in strength and importance depending on fluctuations in war activity. This intervillage network, *giao hieu*, was originally a type of ritual network and a web of relationships that had developed among community temples.[14] A lineage group in a particular village was related to other lineage groups in adjacent villages through a common historical, legendary background. Related lineage groups held joint ancestral rites and took turns

holding these important rites. These interlocal rites have been vigorously revived since the late 1990s. The opening speech by a lineage elder on the occasion of an intervillage ancestral rite traced the history of the rite in three distinctive stages—the prewar ritual prosperity, the destruction of family and village temples during the French and American Wars (The Vietnamese call what the outside world calls the Vietnam War the “American War” in distinction to the earlier war against France.), and the contemporary restoration of intervillage solidarity. As for the second period, he said:

Rooted out of our ancestral land, the people of Ha Gia and the people of Cam An (another neighboring village of Ha My) were herded into a miserable life in concentration camps. Across the barbed wire and the minefields, our ancestors were left unattended, their places bombed and burned down, their tombs bulldozed, their dignity humiliated. Remember our life in the camp. In that inhumane condition, we could not even contemplate holding a rite such as the one we are holding today. We did not have enough food to feed our children, we had to cross the minefield week after week to collect wild vegetables, and we could not offer the miserable rationed bread to our ancestors. We were displaced and deprived of our rights to worship. Our people did not give in. Patriotic villagers joined hands to fight the oppressors, and I dare say that our family was always ahead of others in this struggle. Men of your village and men of our village shared

the same underground tunnels and endured humiliation and hunger together. Women of your village and women of our village shared the little food they had and provided shelter for each other. Our ancestors, although once humiliated and unattended, must be proud of this history of harmony and mutual support among their descendants. We may rebuild the temples if they are broken; we cannot do so with family feelings. Once broken, they cannot be mended. Today, we gather here to remember and renew our family feelings.[15]

In July 1964, communist cadres in the area of Ha My held a general meeting at the communal house of Ha Gia. The meeting inaugurated the village-level structure of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, and leaders urged the construction of “fortress villages” and “combat villages.”[16] A prolific exchange and movement of political cadres and combat units took place during this period between districts and provinces, and the seafront area of Ha My became an important location for shipping combat personnel to the regrouping areas in the province of Quang Ngai. Several hundred men were transferred to Quang Ngai via this route, and they fought in the fierce battles of 1966 in the districts of Binh Son and Tu Nghia, as well as Son Tinh, where My Lai is located. Those who remained in their homeland received guidelines: “Obtain higher efficiency in hiding combat forces. Combine legal and illegal struggles. Employ legal actions to mobilize the village mass.”[17]

When a directive for a legal political struggle, such as the mass action during the Buddhist crisis (1963–1966), was relayed to the village revolutionary committee, the news circulated along family lines as well as among village elders.[18] The impatient activists urged the villagers to act more promptly and more decisively. Opposing voices also existed, and arguments rose between close friends, relatives, and lifetime neighbors. Police informants lived in the village alongside the people they were spying on. In the second half of the 1950s, the Cao Dai sect in Ha Gia and Ha My made a tacit alliance with the South Vietnamese Nationalist Party and fought the VC networks from within the village. By this time, the South Vietnamese administration had classified the village population according to three categories: Group A (illegal people: old resistance fighters and supporters of the Geneva Agreement); Group B (semi-illegal people: relatives and friends of Group A); and Group C (legal and faithful people: supporters of the government programs).[19]

Within the village reality, this classification system was hard to maintain. A single family often had both “legal” and “illegal” people, making Group B a phantom category. Moreover, if an individual wished to remain on ancestral land and survive the war, he had to be in both Group A and C (see below). “Defend the village,” or “Tru bam,” was one of the main slogans of the resistance war from 1960 to 1965, and it was intended as a protest against the

relocation to, and concentration of villagers in, the fortified strategic hamlets. The ABC classification, which did not reflect village reality, could work only in the concentration camps. In strategic hamlets, the refugees had to sit through daily evening classes such as “Essential Lessons in How to Catch the Communists,” and people classified as members of Group B were closely watched.

By the time the U.S. Marines took up a position at the Con Ninh base in 1966, partly to prevent the use of Ha My Beach for subversive activities and traffic, fierce battles were taking place in the Bo Bo Hills, Duy Xuyen, Phi Phu, and elsewhere in the inland region on the western side of Route 1, Vietnam’s main transportation artery. On the road’s eastern side, where Ha My is located, tensions were still low, and civilian casualties reflected that. One early morning in June 1967, U.S. troops at Con Ninh ambushed twelve fishermen, which was reported by the news media of the National Liberation Front,[20] and there were other small-scale incidents in various communities. However, systematic mass civilian killing was as yet unfamiliar to lowland Quang Nam in 1966–1967.

The situation was very different in Quang Ngai. As early as 1966, the ROK Marines were sweeping through rural areas to the east and north of the provincial capital, Quang Ngai. The Republic of Korea (ROK) sent three divisions to the combat zones in central Vietnam: a total of 312,853 men over a twelve-year period

beginning on September 22, 1963, primarily in the years 1966 to 1969.[21] In Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh, ROK troops were met by well-prepared local partisan forces mixed with regular North Vietnamese soldiers. Partisans transferred from other provinces, and the marines suffered high casualties. In response to their losses, the marines cleared village after village in what turned out to be a nearly complete destruction of civilian life in most of Quang Ngai, including the districts of Son Tinh, Tinh Hoa, and Binh Son.[22] Miraculously, My Lai escaped this round of violence, partly because of its relative proximity to Quang Ngai City, but mostly because a small U.S. military installation was located in the immediate vicinity. This pattern of violence in Quang Ngai in 1966 was repeated in Quang Nam two years later.[23]

In December 1967, U.S. forces handed over their Con Ninh base to the ROK marine brigade with the totemic name of the “Blue Dragons,” as part of a general changeover of troops south of Da Nang. Two battalions of the ROK Second Marine Division set up bases along the road from Cam An to Dien Hai on December 4, 1967, establishing their armored unit in Ben Kien. Apart from the towns of Da Nang and Hoi An, the rural area was by this time largely VC-controlled, in the view of the Saigon-U.S. war administration. The new troop deployment south of Da Nang had the strategic objective of pacifying a long corridor of villages from Ha My Beach in the east to the Bo Bo Hills in the west.

The objective was to disconnect the VC fighting forces between Da Nang and Hoi An and block their supply lines. By this time, communist authorities were preparing a general uprising and military offense, which would be known as the Tet Offensive. Villagers were encouraged to contribute food, cash, and medicine in preparation for the coming battles. Several hundred “volunteers” carried food and weapons from the coastal area to VC mountain bases across the Ky Lam Bridge. Insurrection units were secretly brought into Da Nang and Hoi An.

At 2:40 p.m. on the Lunar New Year’s Day (January 31, 1968, the Year of the Monkey), the combined forces of the regular army and local guerilla units launched a coordinated assault on the town of Hoi An from four directions and subsequently occupied the town’s peripheries and two military bases.[24] The National Liberation Front honored the commune of Dien Duong, which includes the village of Ha My, for taking part in the Tet Offensive. In response, the other side swiftly began clearing out villages located in this military corridor. At least six large-scale civilian massacres took place during the first three months of 1968, beginning at Truong Giang (in Dien Trung commune) and Duy Xuyen in the west, and including An Truong (in Dien Phong commune) and Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat (in Dien An commune) in the middle, and ending at Ha My (in Dien Duong commune) and Cam Ha on the eastern coast.[25] Two secret reports made by the district communist cells to the provincial authority recorded

nineteen incidents of mass killing during this short period.[26] The tragedy of mass killing had already been witnessed in Quang Ngai in 1966.[27]

On the twenty-fourth day of the first lunar month in 1968, the ROK Marines left their tanks and armored vehicles outside the boundary of Xom Tay, Ha My's subhamlet number two, at 9:30 a.m. and marched into the village from three directions. By 10:00 a.m. the villagers were assembled at three different sites, including the Nguyen family home and the open space between two subhamlets. At the open space, the commanding officer ordered a desk to be placed facing the crowd. Seated at the desk, he made what felt like, according to the survivors, an unusually long and passionate speech of instruction; the Vietnamese interpreter summarized it for the villagers. There were no heavy arms in sight; soldiers were running around busily. A survivor, Nguyen Thi Bon, said she thought the soldiers were going to give out food and sweets; she had seen this routine before. She was trying to imagine what the day's gift would be. Another survivor, Ba Lap, heard someone whispering, "What if they kill us?" "Don't be ridiculous. Don't say that. You're calling bad luck," she heard from someone else; "They came to give us food. Believe me. Believe it."

It happened just past 10:00 a.m. The officer finished his speech, turned his back to the crowd and began to walk away. Several steps away from the villagers, he made a swift hand gesture. This gesture triggered the M60 machine guns and the M79 grenade launchers,

which were hidden in the bushes. Soldiers began firing at the villagers, and fragmentation grenades exploded on anyone who tried to escape from this living hell. Bon felt village mothers falling on her and her little sister. Ba Lap saw a grenade coming toward her and she fell on her children. Then she felt nothing and saw nothing, except the distant green sweet potato field she began crawling toward. Bon remembers that it was quiet and pitch dark, and hard to breathe underneath the bodies. She tried to move and, hearing her baby sister cry, stopped. Her sister kept crying, and she feared the soldiers might hear her. Bon heard a rapidly speaking foreign voice, then quiet again, and then the detonation of a hand grenade. The assault went on for two hours. At the other killing site, seventy villagers were squeezed into the main altar room of the Nguyen family's residence. Some villagers thought the soldiers were going to hand out food. The owner of the house was not convinced, and he hid behind the ancestral altar with three of his grandchildren. The killing began as soon as machine gun fire was heard from the open site. By noon, 135 villagers were dead: only three were males of combat age; three were unborn children; and four were unidentified. The rest were village women, elders, teenage girls, toddlers, and infants.

In the My Lai area of Quang Ngai, there had also been a changeover of troops, in December 1967. In the early morning of the seventeenth day of the second lunar month of 1968, helicopters carrying Charlie Company of Task Force Barker

landed near the perimeter of the Khe Thuan subhamlet of Tu Cung—the area marked as “My Lai 4” on the military map. This was the first major military action to take place after the South Korean expeditionary forces handed over the area. The village had experienced search missions before by different troops, including South Vietnamese and *nung* (ethnic minority) troops.[28] This time, however, some of the villagers sensed a difference in the atmosphere and asked the women and children to hide in underground shelters. The few village guerilla fighters in Khe Thuan dashed toward the village hill in order to better assess the situation. The house-to-house search began, and pigs and buffaloes were killed first.[29] By the time Charlie Company left, 135 Tu Cung villagers were left dead at three different sites, including the open field between subhamlets Khe Thuan and Khe Dong.

The night after the massacre, a few local partisan fighters came back to My Lai and helped the survivors to bury the victims. The survivors used bamboo baskets to collect the fragments of the broken bodies of their relatives. The burial process was slow and the bodies quickly began to decompose. Untouchable, most of them had to be buried where they were and en masse. When U.S. Army investigators reached the deserted village in November 1969, they would find mass graves at three different sites, as well as a ditch full of decomposed bodies.[30] At Ha My, survivors and their relatives from neighboring villages brought straw mats

to wrap the bodies of the dead. They lay the bodies in the shallow holes dug around the killing site and marked each grave with a small stone or a stick. Later in the afternoon, the soldiers returned and the survivors ran away in panic. The troops brought two D-7 bulldozers, which they used to flatten the houses, destroy the shallow graves, and obliterate the unburied bodies. This assault against the corpses and graves is remembered as the most inhumane aspect of the incident,[31] and it has complicated the process of family commemoration. The wounded villagers of My Lai were brought to the village marketplace on Route 521 by people who had been in the marketplace, and from there they were taken by horse-drawn cart to the General Hospital of Quang Ngai. The sole survivor of the Do family remembers this journey more vividly than any other event of that time. He remembers especially how the owner of the horse refused to carry him for anything less than five hundred dong (Vietnamese currency). The wounded survivors of Ha My were brought to a German medical ship in the port of Da Nang. On his desperate run for help to the Lepers’ Clinic in Hoa Hai, Bon’s father came across an American convoy. The American officer immediately radioed for a rescue helicopter to help the wounded children. He was notified that on Sunday no helicopter was going to fly for civilian passengers. The members of the American convoy were furious; they turned their armored carrier around and set out for Da Nang with the wounded. Ba Lap of Ha My, who had survived the bullets and shrapnel, was

taken to the German medical ship, where her leg was amputated. She had lost a child at the massacre, and arrived at the hospital with her surviving child. Later, whenever she recalled the Year of the Monkey, she would speak of the horror she experienced in the floating hospital as being more terrifying than her experience in the village. In the ship, Ba Lap heard a rumor that the hospital staff was dumping dead Vietnamese bodies into the sea. Her daughter was dying in the intensive care unit, and Ba Lap became hysterical at the thought of losing her in such a way. She crawled along the hospital corridors, dragging her mutilated body, and grabbed at the leg of anyone she could find. She begged for mercy and protested what was, to her, the most heinous crime against human dignity—the abandonment of a human body to the voracious flying fish. Eventually, a Vietnamese nurse escorted her back to her bed and informed her that her child had died, reassuring her that the rumor was false and she would be given the child’s body.

After the massacre, Ha My and My Lai remained largely unoccupied until the end of the war, in 1975. One of the orphan boys of Ha My went to Da Nang to bake French bread for the GIs; a few adults tried to get into the refugee camps in a neighboring district, only to be refused entry on the grounds that they were allegedly from a VC-controlled area. Thus their many years of life as living wandering ghosts began. Having lost their base as well as their families, the few remaining village guerilla fighters

joined other partisan groups operating in neighboring areas. Their comrades welcomed them. The survivors of the Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat massacre brought the corpses of their children to the military checkpoint on Route 1 in protest. They might have been encouraged to do so by VC activists, for their action followed the familiar pattern of post-massacre public protests.[32] The decomposed bodies of the children had to be buried there, where they were lying. The Phong Nhat survivors are reluctant to recall this part of the tragedy; instead, what they remember vividly is the simple fact that, each time they pass the crossroad, they know their children are buried on the roadside. No official inquiry followed their angry protest. Instead, two civilian officials handed out a small amount of cash and a large quantity of white cotton.

After these incidents, a rumor spread across the refugee camps, “A dead Dai Han [Korean] kills dozens of Vietnamese.” At the same time, a new slogan rose among the guerilla fighters: “Xe xac Rong Xanh phong thay Bach Ho,” or “Eliminate the Green [Blue] Dragon, make many corpses of the White [Fierce] Tiger.” The local South Vietnamese soldiers were disturbed by the rumor that a number of the Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat victims were families of active ARVN (Army of Republic of Vietnam) soldiers. The army kept the incidents secret on their side, and there was no war correspondent in the area who could have taken an interest in the activities of non-American forces. The crimes

committed by America's close ally attracted no investigative journalists like Seymour Hersh, either. The refugees carried the rumors with them, however, and some reached the ears of American aid workers. Meanwhile, Vietnamese police officers and their covert agents disseminated the rumor widely in the rural population. According to a former police officer of the Republic of Vietnam, whom I interviewed, she had supplied ROK marine officers with information about how VC forces had reacted to civilian massacres. She recalled in 1997 that she had informed the officer, who had taken her as his lover, that massive civilian killing was indeed breaking the will of the civilian population. The local partisan forces were rapidly losing popular support, according to her, and becoming hesitant to operate in the occupied zones, and the panic-struck villagers were moving back to the city's slums. The local guerrilla forces avoided skirmishes with the Blue Dragon for a while, and in the following months the latter saw a definite drop in the number of their casualties.[33] In 1969-1970, as partisan forces gathered strength and began to launch daring assaults against enemy fortifications, making them increasingly defensive and vulnerable, civilian killings diminished and became a smaller feature of the war's landscape. Then, the war in the region became a more "normal" war, what military historians call conventional war, fought between two parties of combatants.

In 1972-1973, the vicinity of Ha My became a fierce battlefield for four

battalions of the South Vietnamese army and the combined force of a regular North Vietnamese army and local guerilla units. The Saigon forces built two air bases on the ruins of Ha My, and this made the place a prime target. The communist forces took over the area on March 28, 1975. Pham Van Thuong, an eminent veteran of Ha My and Ha Gia, notes in his handwritten essay on village history:

This was a victory of the thirty-year resistance against the aggressors. Our village bred the strongest guerilla force in the region, and it played an important role in connecting the town of Hoi An, the revolutionary base of Vinh Dien, and the city of Da Nang. Our village was a strong base for our revolutionary Communist Party cells and an important support base for our armed forces. The people of our village contributed to the revolutionary campaigns in material and human resources. . . . In the anti-French war, our people fought the enemy fiercely and successfully. Thanks to their heroic efforts, the revolutionary rule in the village developed steadily and controlled the whole area, thereby enabling revolutionary organizations to mushroom across villages despite the enemy's systematic terror and destruction. Rice cultivation, education, the tax system, cultural production—all developed at the highest speed during this period. The early years of the anti-American struggle were a testing time for us. The village revolutionary movement was devastated, and, at times, it

seemed that the struggle was at an end. However, people’s hatred of oppression rose even higher. Undergoing the difficult stages of historical development, the villagers fought heroically. We defeated the forces of aggression assembled from all over the world. Their modern weapons failed to break us, although we had only bare hands. Our strong will and belief finally overcame the test and obtained great merit. Our commune [Dien Duong] honors 1,240 martyrs and 332 war invalids. One in every four family units has war martyrs, three in four entertain revolutionary merit. Our commune has been awarded the following honors by the government:

The Title of “Hero of the People’s Armed Forces”

The Flag of “Bravely killing the U.S. aggressors”

The Flag of “Destroying the enemy tanks”

The Flag of “Attracting the youth to join the resistance”

5 First-Class Liberation Medals

7 Second-Class Liberation Medals

8 Third-Class Liberation Medals

152 Heroic Fighter [titles]

135 Heroic Mother of Vietnam [titles]

191 Gold Certificate of Honor and 377 Glorious Families with

Gold Certificates

[The list continues.][34]

Of the massacre survivors displaced from the village, some failed to survive the war. Of those who survived the war, some did not survive its aftermath. When surviving villagers returned to their homeland in 1975-1976, the place was unrecognizable. They were shocked to find that they could now see the ocean, as the pine forest that had divided their land from the sea had been destroyed. Moreover, the land was littered with the remains of weaponry. Before the village could become a relatively safe place in the 1980s, the stray ammunition and hidden antipersonnel mines claimed more lives; the mines occasionally still claim victims today. And a number of villagers, young and old, continue to suffer the enduring effects of the defoliants and dioxin that were heavily applied in and around the village by the U.S. war administration in the hope of eliminating potential niches for VC agents and generally exposing the area for surveillance.

Those who returned had to rebuild homes and farms. The state administration of unified Vietnam encouraged an all-out mobilization for economic reconstruction and, equally, an all-out struggle against backward cultural practices. Family ancestral burial grounds were in ruins, and the remains of war dead had to be cleared from the farmland where they had been hastily buried. The unidentified remains were simply moved elsewhere; the village administration organized the removal of the Monkey Year massacre victims. The many hopelessly entangled

skeletons were taken to the sand dunes or to the distant bamboo forest and buried there. This hasty, collective reburial precluded any accompanying traditional rituals. The reburial of the victims was improper, in the view of many ordinary Ha My villagers, and it has been a source of great shame and pain for the survivors. While these mass graves were evacuated as village land was prepared for agricultural production, the individual tombs of fallen revolutionary combatants took their place at the center of the village. The latter was to become a prime symbol for the nation’s unity and for its victorious past and prosperous future.



Local cemetery for fallen revolutionary combatants.



Memorial for revolutionary martyrs, with the inscription
 “Your ancestral land will remember your sacrifice.”

Man and machine

Why did massacres occur in certain places and not in others? Fierce local resistance created the impression that the inhabitants of an entire area were the enemy. Sniper fire, land mines, and ambushes provoked anger, and the failure to locate the real enemy frustrated soldiers and administrators. For the local peasant militiamen, sniper fire and booby traps “worked,” since the enemy convoys usually withdrew if they suffered one or two casualties. Without these interventions, foreign troops simply kept marching forward. To conduct an ambush near a settlement was a dangerous task, however, for it could provoke retaliatory acts against villagers. It was unclear to most local peasant militiamen how and when their small attacks, which normally made the enemy retreat, could make them react differently. The massacre in Ha My, however, was not an act of rage but a premeditated act of violence that resulted from rational military planning that had been conducted with a concrete

objective. Nor was the massacre an isolated incident caused by a breakdown in the command structure, as the general inquiry concluded about the My Lai incident.[35] The incident was coordinated, planned, and conducted as part of an effective military strategy. Seymour Hersh concludes from his investigation of the My Lai massacre and its aftermath that “My Lai 4 was out of the ordinary, but it was not isolated.”[36] The same is true of the massacre in Ha My. Given the many similar and simultaneous incidents of mass death that occurred along the corridor, it is very difficult to explain them away as coincidences.

The historian Marilyn Young writes that, for the American public, My Lai was all the more terrifying because the event seemed inexplicable. James Olson and Randy Roberts have concluded that compared to the brutal simplicity of what happened in My Lai, why it happened is complex and remains a mystery.[37] For the survivors of Ha My, the sudden metamorphosis of young foreign lads into a group of red-eyed monsters on that fateful day in 1968 is still a dark, unintelligible mystery. It is like a knot on the rope of history that becomes tighter the more you pull.

In 1967, Ha My villagers were evacuated to the refugee camps of Hoi An and the town slums of Da Nang. Life in the refugee camps, where there was simply not enough food or space for them, was unbearable. A family of seven to nine would squeeze into a shack with a cement floor measuring three meters

square under an unshaded tin roof. Amid the miserable and unsanitary living conditions, as widespread dysentery and other epidemics killed children and the weak, village elders petitioned the Vietnamese authorities and the ROK combat authority to permit their return home. The petition letter argued that none of the displaced villagers supported the VC, and put forward the villagers’ love of their native land as the main reason for their desire to return.

It is not clear whether the villagers were granted permission to return to Ha My, but they returned there at the end of December 1967. For the next three weeks, foreign soldiers from the fortification on the sand dune between the village and the sea assisted the resettling villagers with food and building materials. In return, village women offered the soldiers baskets of green chilies and other local produce. When a search-and-destroy mission set fire to a thatched roof, some soldiers from the base came to help put out the fire. The image of two foreign soldiers, one with a cigarette lighter and the other with a bucket of water, arguing with each other in their foreign tongue, remains one of the most cherished war memories in Ha My. When the bucket-holding man accidentally threw the water onto the Zippo-holding man and the bucket onto the burning house, people remember that everyone laughed, even the desperate home-owner. These fragmented memories of small gifts being exchanged and the help in extinguishing the fire have made some villagers unable to

accept the hypothesis that the troops who carried out the atrocity were the same troops who had helped them before the massacre. They believe there was a change in troops at the base immediately before the massacre, or that the soldiers from the base did not participate in ransacking the village on that day. There is no hard evidence to support this belief, apart from the survivors' testimony that the killers were complete strangers. But their belief is resolute.

The petition's statement that there were no VC supporters in the Ha My village was probably not true. Likely, a network of relationships connected the villagers across the visible "normal" village life and the hidden, underground revolutionary activities. However, this was a network of bone and flesh; and wartime kinship, no matter how unconventional it might have been forced to become during wartime, does not collapse to the political-military classification of un-uniformed combatants and the fantastical definition of the generic, faceless enemy.[38] Civilians can assist and harbor combatants as civilians. They can do so out of coercion or out of sympathy or out of family and communal obligation. That does not validate the idealized image of a people's war—"People are the water, and our army the fish"—nor does it justify the slogan of village pacification, "Pump out the water and catch the fish." The presence of a lawful target within a defined space does not justify the definition of the entire space as an extension of that specific target. The act

of wantonly destroying the space on the basis of that unlawful definition is criminal. It is against nature as well as law to pump out the water in order to catch the fish.

The victims of the massacre were clearly and categorically unarmed civilian noncombatants. First, they tolerated the Vietcong in their village, if there really were any, because these VC activists belonged to their community. Second, if in fact they hid and supported these activists, they did so out of respect for the values and customs of communal life and not necessarily in following the doctrine of the people's war. Even in the Cold War's arid environment of total destruction, there dwelt moral realities of human kinship. At the heart of the crime against humanity, if it has a heart, lurks the insanity of taking the enemy's propaganda as reality and making war on the basis of a profoundly superstitious belief in that fantasy. As Olson and Roberts write, "As in all wars, soldiers learned from other soldiers, and myths, rumours, oft-repeated tales, and superstitions became firmly held and scientifically proven axioms. The most common belief was that any Vietnamese man, woman, or child might be a Vietcong operative." [39]

The Ha My survivors believe that the killers were strangers. This belief does not explain why the crime took place, but it does suggest at least how the crime could have been prevented. The belief assumes that, even in an extreme condition of total war, you can distinguish the face of a killer from the

face of a foreign soldier. If the Vietnamese could do it, why not the foreigners? Why couldn't they distinguish the face of their foe from the face of a toddler? When a soldier from Charlie Company describes his so-called mental process of turning civilians into the enemy—"Who is the enemy? How can you distinguish between the civilians and the non-civilians? . . . The good or the bad? All of them look the same"—what does he mean? If an armed, educated professional soldier cannot distinguish the same from the different in the way that a village schoolgirl can, what can we say about the modern army?[40]

Evidence suggests that locally based troops did harm local civilians. Other evidence indicates that locally based troops refrained from harming local civilians.[41] There was a coordinated movement of troops across villages and districts during and after the 1968 Tet Offensive.[42] A locally based troop relegated the task of clearing the immediate area to a collateral unit in a neighbouring commune or district. In this system of exchange, the same soldier could set fire to a house in one place and help rescue a similar-looking house on fire in another place. I believe that many soldiers of the Vietnam War suffered from being the pendulum in the war's cold clockwork, and that they struggled with the memory of that cruel oscillation in their postwar lives.[43] From a mechanical point of view, the pendulum—that is, the soldier—was only a functional piece of a much more complex machine. It had its own

dynamics but it could not control its movement, and it had to keep swinging between two extreme points until the machine ran out of power. The survivors of Ha My seem to refuse to see this mechanistic truism. "Yes, they were the same people," the old partisan leader said; "we knew that." "No, they were not the same people," Ba Lap protested; "you were not there. You didn't see them. I saw them." Ba Lap refused to efface the memory of the soldier with the water bucket, to let this positive memory be corrupted by the bright shining movement of a faceless robotic soldier's single oscillating identity. If this is a state of denial, it is not a denial of truth but a refusal to reduce humanity to truth.[44]



ROK soldiers helping elderly Vietnamese villagers evacuate.



ROK soldiers helping children evacuate.

Eighty or twenty percent?

In 1974 James Trullinger, a former employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Vietnam, conducted a unique project of empirical research on wartime village life, in My Thuy Phuong, seven miles southwest of Hue. He stayed in this village until the very end of the war, in March 1975. Among the many valuable facts he gathered about the war on the village level were those concerning the 1968 Tet Offensive: “For the estimated 5 percent of the people who were Government supporters, Tet of 1968 intensified hatred of the [National Liberation] Front, and for some planted seeds of doubt concerning American dependability as an ally. The 10 to 15 percent who were politically uncommitted remained so, but were deeply impressed by the Front’s strength. And My Thuy Phuong’s Front supporters, an estimated 80 to 85 percent of the people, were left with proud memories of

the boldest strikes yet against the Government and its ally.”[45]

“Eighty percent VC” is indeed how some Vietnamese villagers, even today, present the wartime reality of their village. I heard this from two old resistance war veterans in Ha My in 1995, and then heard it again from two survivors in Khe Thuan subhamlet (in My Lai) a few years later. “The village was strong at that time. Eighty percent VC, at least,” said the man in My Lai. If 80 percent of the village population was VC, and 80 percent of the village population was massacred in the same year, this makes at least 60 percent of the victims VC. In both instances, however, my informants were invoking the idea of “80 percent VC” without reference to their own community. The informant in Khe Thuan was describing what he knew about Khe Thuan’s neighboring communities, Khe Dong and Khe Thuong. The aged veteran in Ha My was saying “80 percent VC” with regard to Ha My’s neighboring village Ha Gia, and this he did in contrast to Ha My, where only 20 percent of the population at most was VC, according to him. I asked some residents in Khe Thuong hamlet about the place’s alleged “80 percent VC” historical identity. They agreed with people in Khe Thuan that the Americans mistook the non-VC Tu Cung (My Lai 4)—in which Khe Thuan and Khe Thuong are subunits—for the VC-strong area of Truong Diep (My Lai 3). This understanding, dominant among the people of My Lai, makes the massacre of My Lai doubly tragic, for the violence fell upon the wrong place. However, my

informants in Khe Thuong strongly contested the idea that their community had been a VC stronghold during the time of the massacre. One of them was particularly angry and said, “That is pure nonsense. In my village there was no VC. In theirs they know very well that they were all VC at that time.” His wife reminded him of his paternal uncle, from the same hamlet, who was a local partisan fighter. Turning his face angrily toward her, he said, “OK. Maybe 80 percent for them and 20 for us. Maybe, but not the other way around, absolutely not.”

A former village chief of Ha My argued that there was not a single revolutionary activist among the victims of the 1968 massacre—they were all simple villagers, he said. Since 1995, when we first met, he has told me numerous stories that contradict his initial contention. He was well aware of the history of revolutionary activism of Ha My, in fact, more aware than most other former veterans. He introduced me to the village guerrilla fighter who underwent the unimaginable experience of hearing the staccato noise of the machine guns and the screams of the villagers from his underground hideout during the two hours of the Ha My massacre. This man knew that his wife and children, as well as his parents and grandparents, were among the victims. The village chief was proud, as were other village leaders, of the Hero Village title awarded to Ha My (and Ha Quang and Ha Gia) in 1989, and at public gatherings he used to speak of the village’s long, exceptional contribution to

the nation’s history. He knew the names of the Monkey Year massacre victims who earned titles of revolutionary honor, and he was a close relative of some of the village civilian activists who perished in the massacre. He helped to write the local history of the women’s struggle, in which the women of Ha My in particular appear to have played an exceptional role, and he collected historical facts about Ha My’s distinguished place in the history of the Communist Party’s organizational activity in the region. Why he asserted that there were “no VC among the victims” was a mystery to me.

Looking back, however, it appears that what the former village chief said was not a falsification of historical fact. The political identity of wartime Ha My depended partly on what the identification was for. Had I been an investigator from the provincial Department of Information and Culture dispatched to the village to collect data for a government publication on the local history of revolutionary struggle, the elder’s description might have been entirely different. In fact, the local history project conducted in Ha My and elsewhere in 1999-2000 focused on the village’s role in the wartime political-military campaigns, and it affirmed that many of the cited heroes of the anti-French campaigns were included in the list of victims of the Monkey Year tragedy.[46] In this context, the description “80 percent VC” can easily shift to become a statement addressing the collective historical identity of the self rather than others.

The former village chief is himself a veteran of the revolutionary war and has close relatives who worked as part-time peasant fighters within the village. His family provided these village fighters with food and shelter in difficult times; the fighters cultivated the land and helped build shelters in more peaceful times. These peasant men moved to the underground tunnel (or the village pond) when the situation was intense, but ate with their wives and children and lived lives that appeared normal on quiet days. This family had a neighbor who had been a laborer-soldier for the French army. He remained “neutral” throughout the war. The village communist cell did not trust him; he was too old for the Saigon army. He cultivate rice and sweet potatoes on quiet days and ran away to the bush whenever the Saigon or allied forces came to the village. His family paid “tax” to the resistance war committee, just like many other village households at the time, and helped the partisan forces with food and labor. Most villagers did so, and it seemed natural to him that he should do it too. This man’s neighbor had five children, all too young to join the army on either side. One woman’s late husband had been an official in the South Vietnamese administration. She couldn’t contribute much to the communist side, because she was very poor, and she hoped to evacuate to a city if possible. But she did help other villagers cultivate the communal land. The harvest from this land was shipped to the western mountain regions to feed the young volunteers from the north who were camped in the forest. Another

neighboring family, the Tran family, were devout members of the local Cao Dai temple. Some of them had moved to the town of Hoi An and, unlike other villagers, did not return to the village in 1967 but managed to settle outside the refugee camps, partly with the assistance of friends in the religious sect. The town recruited the husband as an absentee village chief of Ha Gia and trusted him to report to the authorities the identities of VC-supporting villagers. It is unclear how sincerely he performed his duty during this time.[47] However, he regularly relayed information about the movements of Saigon and allied troops to his relatives who remained in the village. On at least two occasions, this information proved vital in saving human lives.

In this complex situation of war on a village level, “80 percent VC” and “20 percent VC” were indeed both realistic estimates. The truth of this illogical data and the collapse of the apparently enormous difference between two quantitative estimates are central to an understanding of the historical reality of the war in the village. The truth of 80 or 20 percent, and “No VC” or “All VC,” for that matter, depended on whom the information was addressed to. The former village chief of An Bang hamlet succeeded in saving its two hundred villagers from the imminent threat of mass death by swearing to the foreign officer that there was not a single VC or VC supporter there. Shortly afterward, his sister joined a group of villagers gathered to welcome a delegation of party officials from the provincial

authority. The man from the province asked the village women, “Are you all diligent workers for the glorious victory of our revolutionary war?” The village women said, in one voice, “Yes, Uncle, all of us. Yes, Uncle, our whole village.”[48]

The identity of a community could shift between two opposite ends of the political spectrum depending on the situation and depending on the identity of the force that intended to classify it. Self-identity in this context oscillated across the frontier of Cold War and communicated with both regimes. It shifted from one to the other side of the frontier as the frontier itself moved between night and day and from season to season. The brutal force of bipolar politics influenced subjective identity and imposed upon it the cruel zero-sum theory. While the bifurcating system pursued the logic of zero-sum, people responded with the opposite logic of being both none and all. Whereas the system insisted on the homogeneity of space and the immutability of identity, the lived reality of the war was “contradictory space” or “dialectical space,”[49] and identity in this reality was not an unchanging idem but a mutative entity whose transformability offered the only possibility for the preservation of life.

The village men, who fought in the fields of village war, oscillated between displacement from and placement in their native land. Apart from the few full-time guerrilla fighters who were removed entirely from the obligation of cultivation, most of these peasant fighters were also

responsible for agricultural production and only occasionally mobilized to participate in a large battle beyond the boundary of their village. When the peasant fighters shook hands with uniformed regular soldiers, endured long tedious speeches by the political officers, and then ran swiftly home on moonless nights, it is not clear whether they were still soldiers. Back in their village, they received directives from the VC liaison, gathered in twos or threes to discuss the order, and shared their wisdom and experience—about an offensive against the local military installation, about a particularly unsympathetic village chief, and about installation of booby traps designed to stymie search-and-destroy missions. The successful installation of a box of explosives within the enemy’s Con Ninh base by three Ha My village partisan fighters is well known in the area. When they installed it, they were clearly combatants and had the spirit of combatants. At certain times, they farmed as ordinary villagers, and in less peaceful times, they took the water bucket and the carbine and hid in the underground shelter or in the old bomb crater filled with rainwater. When these fighters transformed back to farmers, it is not at all clear whether they were still combatants and considered themselves as such. When they hid underground, collected the food bundle, removed the camouflage of buffalo refuse, and ate the sticky rice brought from home, it is clear that they were not eating like other villagers and that they were not really ordinary villagers. However, when they finished the meal, lay down on the mat,

and began to think about the new ducklings, the abdominal problems of the buffalo, and watering the vegetable plot—it is again unclear whether we can easily call them combatants of a war. These people were Vietcong fighters, and they were not. They were ordinary farmers and civilians, and they were not. Their identity shifted as they themselves shifted from the battlefield to village life and back to another battlefield again and again. They did not necessarily carry their village identity to the battlefield, and their fighter identity was not always carried to their deceptively quiet village social life. They were both soldiers and peasants, yet they could also be neither.

When a young village woman of Ha Gia was being dragged away by ROK soldiers in the dry season of 1967, she begged the soldiers to stop, saying, “No VC. No VC.” The soldiers had found a carbine behind a false wall in her house. When her husband found the courage to come to the army base to make a plea for his wife, he said to the guardsman, “No VC. No VC.” When he said it, it is possible that he really meant it. It is possible that the man was not a VC when he emerged from underground the previous morning and enjoyed the rare treat of a siesta in his own bed in his own home. It is possible that he was no longer a faithful worker for glorious victory when he was coaxed out of the suffocating underground shelter to spend the afternoon with his wife. When he left home to check the bamboo fish trap, and his wife was gathering the *ban chang* (riceflour tortillas) left to dry on a mat, it is possible

that neither of them had anything to do with either side of the war, at least for that sun-drenched afternoon. The old Viet Minh activists in Ha My and My Lai stayed put in the village, worked on the rice paddy, and gave rice to the village guerillas. It is possible that they did so as village elders, not necessarily because they remembered the doctrine of “Tinh quan dan nhu ca voi nuoc” (People are the water, and our army the fish). None of these old French War veterans, apart from a few exceptional cases, were recognized as war martyrs by the government after the war, nor were they considered revolutionaries by the villagers before the massacre. In village life, it is possible that people paid tax to the revolutionary authorities because they knew that peasants had paid tax for as long as they had existed. And it is also possible that people hid weapons more in fear of the mortal consequence of not doing so than because of any fervent commitment to the revolutionary war dictum “Each inhabitant [is] a soldier, each village a fortress.”

The paid, uniformed, full-time, professional soldiers did not accept the fact that people could fight without a uniform, as a villager rather than a soldier. They did not understand the fact that, when these people fought, many of them fought simply to survive rather than to win. Because soldiers didn’t understand this complexity, they could have seen the woman clearing the bed, where her VC husband slept, as VC, her children breaking coconut shells at the back of the house as VC, their house and

their chickens and buffalos as VC, the tombs of their ancestors and the temple they worshipped as VC, and the entire world they lived in and relied on as entirely VC. Perhaps the soldiers couldn't see otherwise, since for them the meat they ate, the house that sheltered them, the temple they worshipped, and the entire world they belonged to belonged to one single inseparable complex—the army.

The cruel history of the Cold War is not a thing of the past in the villages that survived the war. The historical identity of the village still fluctuates in the violent memory of night and day, and between the hero and victim identities that together perpetuate this irreconcilable contradiction. In this double historical memory, Ha My and My Lai were both VC and “No VC” villages. Each harbored 80 percent *cach mang* (revolutionaries) and 20 percent Vietcong subversives. Pride and stigma, and honor and terror, tail one another and keep alive the magical realism in which a village is both VC and “No VC.” Likewise, the collective identity of the victims of the village massacres remains unclassifiable. The victims were “simple villagers,” and they were not. They were “heroic defenders of the native land,” and they were not.



Pictures and names of war dead displayed in the back of a Buddhist pagoda, Quang Nam.



Graves of the Vietnam War fallen soldiers, National Cemetery of South Korea.



Noi Buon (The sorrows of war), silk painting by renowned Vietnamese artist, Ly Truc Dung.

Just as their political identity could not be settled within the Cold War's zero-sum coherence, the moral identity of the Monkey Year victims continued to be unsettling in the domain of family ritual remembrance. A generation after the massacre, beginning in the early 1990s, the reburial of the improperly buried victims of war became one of the main preoccupations in My Lai and Ha My. In a mass exodus of the war dead to new places, the memory of mass death was revitalized too, and people invented creative new ways to deal with the grief of unjust death.

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Press, 2006) and *The Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

He contributed this article to *Japan Focus*. Posted June 15, 2007.

See two other important articles on Indochina war atrocities on *Japan Focus*:

[Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, Bombs Over Cambodia: New Light on US Air War](#)

[Greg Lockhart, The Minefield: An Australian Tragedy in America's Vietnam War](#)

Notes:

[1] Ministry of Defense Institute of Military History, *The Vietnam War and the Korean Army*, vol. 3 (Seoul: Ministry of Defense Institute of Military History, Republic of Korea, 2003), p. 412.

[2] Quoted from Quang Ngai General Museum, *A Look Back upon Son My* (Quang Ngai: Quang Ngai General Museum, 1998), p. 12.

[3] Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994).

[4] Noam Chomsky, preface to John Duffett, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence* (New York: Clarion, 1970), pp. xiv-xv.

[5] Frank Baldwin, Diane Jones, and Michael Jones, *America's Rented Troops:*

South Koreans in Vietnam (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1974).

[6] *Toi Ac Xam Luoc Thuc Dan Moi Cua De Quoc My o Viet Nam* (Crimes committed by America during her neocolonial invasion of Vietnam) (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản chính trị quốc gia, 1975), pp. 30-52, 58-113.

[7] *Vietcong*, or *VC*, is the term by which Americans referred to the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, a communist-led alliance of a dozen political and religious groups, formed in 1960.

[8] Ho Khang, *The Tet Mau Than 1968 Event in South Vietnam* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 2001), p. 31.

[9] Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds., *Vietnam and America: The Most Comprehensive Documented History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Grove, 1995), pp. 390-91.

[10] Dalloz, *La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), pp. 115-202.

[11] Jonathan Schell, *The Real War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), p. 114.

[12] *Dau Tranh Cach Mang Cua Dang Bo Va Nhan Dan Xa Dien Duong, 1930-1975* (The revolutionary struggle of the Communist Party and the people of Dien Duong Commune, 1930-1975), (Tam Ky: Nha xuất bản Tam Ky), pp. 123-24.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-39.

[14] To Lan, "Special Relationships between Traditional Viet Villages," *The Traditional Village in Vietnam* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 1993), pp. 295-96, 301-4.

[15] From the written text of the speech delivered in February 1999, copied in my field notes.

[16] See Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 224-25.

[17] *Dau Tranh Cach Mang Cua Dang Bo Va Nhan Dan Xa Dien Duong*, pp.106-7.

[18] The Buddhist crisis originated on May 8, 1964, in the central Vietnamese city of Hue, when government troops fired into the crowd that gathered to protest the government order that banned the display of banners on the Buddha's anniversary.

[19] *Dau Tranh Cach Mang Cua Dang Bo Va Nhan Dan Xa Dien Duong*, p.106. The Geneva Peace Accords, signed by France and Vietnam in 1954, ended the first Indochinese War (French War) and ordered the temporary partition of the country at the seventeenth parallel. The agreement included an agenda according to which national elections would be held in 1956 to unify the country, which did not happen.

[20] *Giai Phong*, June 1, 1967.

[21] By 1969, about fifty thousand South

Korean troops were engaged in combat in Vietnam. There were an additional fifteen thousand civilian laborers and technicians. Their participation in the war contributed significantly to the economic takeoff of South Korea as an Asian industrial force. See Se Jin Kim, "South Korea's Involvement in Vietnam and Its Economic and Political Impact," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 6 (1970): 519-32; Carl E. Meacham, "Money for Men," *New Republic* (October 9, 1971): 7-9. For the U.S. administration, their participation was crucial not only for justifying the war by internationalizing it but also for easing the burden on the U.S. ground forces. See Yu-Mi Moon, "The Participation of Korean Troops in the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. diss., Seoul National University, 1994), pp. 68-83; Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), pp. 31-66; Stanley Larson and James Collins, *Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1985).

[22] See Jonathan Schell, *The Military Half: An Account of Destruction in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

[23] For brief accounts of massacres in the province of Quang Ngai, see *Di Tich Thang Canh Quang Ngai*, pp. 206-8, 211-14; Dai Cuong, *Lich Su Viet Nam Tap III* (History of Vietnam, vol. 3) (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản giáo dục, 2001), pp. 207-8.

[24] *Dau Tranh Cach Mang Cua Dang Bo Va Nhan Dan Xa Dien Duong*, pp. 138-39.

[25] *Lich Su Dang Bo Quang Nam Da Nang*, pp. 182-85, 240-47; Chu Cam Phong, *Nhat Ky Chien Tranh* (Diary of a war) (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản văn học, 2000), pp. 18-26, 125-39; *Dang Bo Huyen Duy Xuyen Xuat Ban* (The Communist Party of Duy Xuyen District) (Da Nang: Nha xuất bản Da Nang, 1964), pp. 85-87.

[26] *Ho So Toi Ac Cua Linh Pac Chung Hy* (The crimes of the soldiers of Pac Chung Hy [the president of South Korea, 1961-1979]), report from BK25 to VK25, A85 on March 25, 1968, Quang Nam Province, Archive Da Nang; *Ve Cuoc Dan Tranh Chong Bon Nam Trieu Tien Cua Dong Bac Dien An Thu Thang Loi* (Victory in the struggle against the Korean mercenaries by the people of Dien An), report from PK25, So 5 TB/VP on March 1, 1968, Quang Nam Province, Archive Da Nang. A government newspaper of North Vietnam reported the incidents in April of that year: "To Cao Toi Ac Da Man Cua My Va Tay Sai o Quang Ngai, Quang Nam (We denounce the savage crimes of the Americans and their henchmen in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam)," *Nhan Dan*, April 17, 1968.

[27] *Di Tich Thang Canh Quang Ngai*, pp. 206-14; *Bao An Dat Va Nguoi* (Defending the land and the people) (Da Nang: Nha xuất bản Da Nang, 1999), pp. 162-63.

[28] The U.S. special forces trained thousands of recruits from ethnic minority groups at Hoa Cam, south of Da

Nang, in the early 1960s. See John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 74-76.

[29] See Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992), chs. 4 and 5.

[30] Hersh, *My Lai* 4, p. 75.

[31] As recorded by a village elder in “Xom Tay, Dat Va Nguoi,” “The blood [of the victims] covered our land, and their bodies were not properly buried. There was no funeral for them. . . . The enemy burned down the entire village and flattened the graveyards. The tombs of our ancestors were desecrated, and the enemy assaulted the dead bodies [of the victims] and mass-buried them in the hope of concealing their crime. Such criminal acts are unheard-of in human history.” For the traditional Vietnamese laws against the desecration of tombs, see Gustave Dumoutier, *Rituel funeraire des Annamites* (Hanoi: Schneider, 1904), pp. 254-60.

[32] Another common form of political protest was to block the roads with ancestor altars and perform ceremonies to hold up troop movements. This tactic was used mainly against the government troops. See James W. Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 125.

[33] The official accounts by the ROK Army claim 4,687 ROK casualties in Vietnam and 41,400 enemy casualties.

[34] This extract is cited from his original draft manuscript written for inclusion in *Dau Tranh Cach Mang Cua Dang Bo Va Nhan Dan Xa Dien Duong*. Part of the essay was edited out of the printed version (Tam Ky: Nha xuất bản Tam Ky, 2003). The list of heroic entitlements, however, is included in the book (pp. 175-76).

[35] W. R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), pp. 229-45; United States Department of the Army, “Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident,” in Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, eds., *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law?* (New York: Free Press, 1976), pp. 20-372; James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), p. 24; Telford Taylor, “War Crimes: Son My,” in Jay W. Baird, ed., *From Nuremberg to My Lai* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1972), p. 265.

[36] Seymour M. Hersh, *Cover-Up: The Army’s Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 268. Also Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 14.

[37] Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1991), p. 244; Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, p. 25; Tim O’Brien, “The Mystery of My Lai,” in David L. Anderson, ed., *Facing My Lai: Moving beyond the Massacre* (Lawrence: University Press of

Kansas, 1998), pp. 171-78.

[38] Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, p. 10.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 16. Townsend Hoopes, the undersecretary of the U.S. Air Force from 1967 to 1969, blames the cultural gap for this error of mistaking civilians for combatants: "Americans could not get to the heart of local politics in Vietnam, because the Vietnamese would not permit the necessary intimacy, and because it was beyond U.S. capability to provide enough operatives with the knowledge and skill to break through the formidable barriers of language and cultural difference." *The Limits of Intervention*, pp. 70-71.

[40] Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, p. 16. On the dynamics of depersonalization in atrocious mass violence, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (London: Phoenix, 2000), pp. 158-78.

[41] See Neale, *The American War in Vietnam*, p. 130.

[42] On the general situation after the Tet Mau Than event of 1968, compare Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), and Ho Khang, *The Tet Mau Than 1968 Event in South Vietnam* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 2001).

[43] See the intriguing analysis of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms by Allan Young, "Bodily Memory and Traumatic Memory," in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 99. Also Allen Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 124-28.

[44] On the state of denial, see Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

[45] Trullinger, *Village at War*, p. 129.

[46] Personal communication with Ha Phuc Mai, the director of the Da Nang War Museum, who advised the project.

[47] On the role of Cao Dai in the politics of war, see Jayne Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1981).

[48] Interviews with the family of the wartime village chief in An Bang, in December 1997.

[49] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 292-96.