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# Forging the Nation Through Friendship: Nationalist China's Propaganda on Wounded Soldiers in the Early 1940s

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**Abstract** This essay offers a reflection on the discourse concerning the relief work for wounded soldiers in China during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression as presented on the pages of the magazine *The Friends of the Wounded Soldiers*. As the mouthpiece for one of the most important associations connected to the New Life Movement during the war, the journal's articles offer insights into the articulation of martial citizenship as a core notion in the process of nation-building in those years, showing how the relief work was conceived as a way of promoting a stronger engagement – articulated in terms of friendship – of the educated élite towards society and the state.

**Keywords** China's war against Japan. War relief. Propaganda. Wounded soldiers. New Life Movement.

**Summary** 1 The Challenges of Relief for Military Victims of War. – 2 Building a Martial Citizenship Through Friendship. – 3 Conclusions.

In the last twenty years, the historical significance of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45) has been widely recognised from both contemporary Chinese and global perspectives. An increasingly rich scholarship has not only focussed on reassessing the military history of those dramatic years (e.g. Peattie, Drea, Van de Ven 2010); it has also investigated the impact of the war on the processes of state-building, on the one hand, and on in-



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dividual and collective values and attitudes, everyday life, and political culture, on the other (e.g. Lary 2010; Mitter 2013; Lu 2015). Indeed, as the first modern mass conflict experienced by the Chinese people, the war was a foundational moment in the making of modern China from several perspectives, not least because it contributed to shaping and spreading a new imaginary of the Chinese national community and society.

This imaginary was produced through the engagement of Chinese intellectual and political élites at both the national and local levels in an unprecedented – at least in terms of scale – effort of mass propaganda and popular education as part of an attempt to make sense of the conflict and mobilise the population in support of the military resistance (Hung 1994). One of the outcomes of this effort was to blur the divide between civilians and soldiers in a grander vision of a united and disciplined society, whose citizens were keen to pour their efforts into the salvation and progress of their motherland. This was a vision shaped by nationalist values, whose origins predated the war and can be traced back to the impact of colonial discourse on the self-perception of Chinese élites at the turn of the twentieth century, when the perceived lack of modern martial values – physical strength, self-discipline, sobriety, self-sacrifice, endurance, resilience and solidarity beyond the circle of family relations – was identified as one of the main reasons for China's political weakness in international society.

Unsurprisingly, this mass pedagogy to promote modern nationalism paid specific attention to the making of the modern soldier as a model for a new citizenship (Xu 2019). Particularly after the abolition of imperial examinations in 1905, this was matched by the recognition of modern military education as a valuable pathway to a job and even a career in civil power, as a consequence of the increasing militarisation of political life in the years of the Republican revolution.

Nevertheless, this did not mean that the social and cultural position of rank-and-file soldiers changed in a radical way. Throughout the Republican era (1912-49), the violence and insecurity experienced by Chinese society due to the ongoing wars between the armies of the warlords and between the Guomindang and the Communists, contributed to maintaining the social perception of soldiers as a symbol not of the strength of a modern Chinese state but of the divisiveness and chaos of the domestic Chinese political landscape. It was only in 1934, with the launch of the New Life Movement, that Chiang Kai-shek envisioned a stronger militarisation of Chinese society in cultural terms as an important step in transforming China into a modern nation-state.

The broad agenda of the New Life Movement was to discipline Chinese society, both élites and the common people, in order to shape a new ideal of modern citizenship inspired by martial values (Ferlanti

2010; Culp 2007; Bodenhorn 2002; Clinton 2017). This movement hinted at a transformation of the image of soldiers, which accelerated during the total conflict against Japan, when Nationalist propaganda offered a representation of China as a heroic and united nation that was the victim of the violence and brutality of the occupiers and ready to resist occupation at any cost. In this representation, wounded soldiers played a pivotal role. Over their maimed and suffering bodies and minds, a discourse on the destiny of China as the victim of the occupiers' violence and on its heroic resistance was intertwined with the symbolic construction of a new national community shaped by martial values and social cohesion. To explore this facet of Chinese war propaganda, this essay offers a brief analysis of the discourse on the care of wounded soldiers developed by the monthly magazine *Friends of the Wounded Soldiers* (*Shangbing zhi you yuekan* 伤兵之友月刊), which, under the aegis of the Nationalist Party, was published in Nationalist China from the early 1940s as the mouthpiece for one of the most important associations for war relief.

## 1 The Challenges of Relief for Military Victims of War

Wounded soldiers represented just one of the dramatic tolls paid by China in the War of Resistance. According to recent Chinese statistics, the total military casualties during the war amounted to more than eight million people, of whom 2,240,000 were considered wounded (An 2018). This number is probably an underestimate, as most of the wounded soldiers died quickly, before they were able to receive proper treatment.

Despite the lack of definite numbers, it is evident that the need to cope with soldiers requiring medical and social care because they were wounded in battle was a great challenge for the Nationalist government, from both a military and political perspective. In modern states and in modern warfare, soldiers are not considered expendable, as their training makes them valuable assets for war. There is certainly a consideration of cost, as the need to instruct and train a soldier makes it important to preserve that valuable human resource. In China, as national conscription was not applied, the problem of recruiting soldiers was quite significant. Even with its scarcity of resources, the Nationalist state could not really afford to lose credibility by abandoning the wounded to their sad destiny, despite the negative opinion of Westerners about the Chinese capacity and perhaps will to help the wounded (Powell 2015).

One of the challenges was to develop military medicine. The capacity to offer medical services at the frontline was a huge but fundamental task for the Nationalists (Watt 2013). During the first year of the war, the lack of personnel and means to evacuate the wounded

from the battlefield and to cure them was evident. However, foreign observers often ascribed the problem not only to poor organisation and lack of material means, but also to the indifference of the army officers towards the ordinary soldiers (Watt 2013, 119). In the course of time, the problem was somehow properly addressed. Although a systematic approach was missing, several military commanders became aware of the need to provide healthcare to the wounded within the military structure.

The improvement in healthcare services for the wounded was essentially due to the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps, led by a Chinese medical élite trained abroad and materially supported by the overseas Chinese (Mamlok 2018). The treatment of wounded soldiers was one of the main areas where civilians and intellectuals were engaged in the military side of the war. In his study, Watt emphasises that the Chinese Red Cross “provided a way to overcome the resistance of educated youth to war work and bring their patriotism and skills to the aid of front-line soldiers” (Watt 2013, 120). Thanks to the schools operated by the leading Red Cross doctors (mostly overseas Chinese) under the aegis of the national government and ministries, new personnel were educated to serve in military hospitals. Moreover, the Nationalist government mobilised medicine students to serve in the army hospitals: in 1941, almost eighty per cent of the students in the field were conscripted to work in government-run hospitals and healthcare centres (Chang, Myers 1994, 169).

Under the control of the Nationalist government, the assistance for wounded soldiers was conceived of as an arena for a stronger interaction between the military and civilians. The activities of the Chinese Red Cross and the government institutions for relief were not only addressed to the military but also to civilians, especially as these activities involved preventive medicine at both the battlefield and the rear front. This was because one of the main challenges of wartime was the control and reduction of the health risks connected to epidemic diseases, which was also addressed by developing logistics and production capacity in biomedicine (Brazelton 2019).

However, civilians were not only the beneficiaries of the new emerging organisation of military medicine. They were also a strategic resource to make the system work. Particularly after 1938, when the military hospitals were mainly located at the rear front and distant from the battle line, the tasks of assisting the wounded on the spot and carrying them to the hospital often depended on the cooperation of the civil population, as in the contribution of local peasants as stretcher bearers.

As war medicine was not exclusively a military affair but also conceived of in terms of the public interest of the populace at large, war propaganda made the problem of assisting wounded soldiers a discursive space for promoting a new social and cultural cohesion and

Nationalist values crossing the divide between soldiers and civilians. The cure of the injured in the battlefield was represented as evidence of the coming into existence of a new China, whose citizens were not only all keen to support one another in the name of a solidarity imbued with martial and heroic values, but also ready to recognise the centrality of these values to their nation's identity.

In symbolic terms, the Japanese invasion of China implied a change in the status of military personnel, who were accorded the halo of heroes in the defence of the motherland. As Diana Lary writes, this image of soldiers was mainly the "product of mass anger" caused by the Japanese violent occupation, and it was boosted by a huge propaganda effort by the Nationalists (Lary 2014, 240). At the same time, the central role attributed to soldiers in China's self-representation also reflected the enactment of an ideal of 'martial citizenship' (Diamant 2010) in which the willingness to offer flesh and blood fighting for the sake of the nation was worthy of greater respect than other forms of patriotism. Historically, in this notion of citizenship, participation in war enabled individuals and groups, who until that moment had remained marginal in the national imagination because of lower educational or social status, to overcome the implicit limitations and obstacles to full recognition as citizens.

However, if participation as fighting soldiers in war could ideally open the pathway to a full recognition of soldiers' status as citizens, this acknowledgement has to be measured along time. Admiration and respect may not be destined to last long when soldiers are back in civil life, especially if they are disabled or suffering in a situation characterised by a scarcity of material resources. In this sense, as Neil Diamant argues, popular attitudes towards veterans and ex-soldiers who embodied the human sacrifice for the national community should be considered a standard for gauging the depth and solidity of national feelings and patriotism in a community (Diamant 2010). The role of the state in this, however, cannot be dismissed. In wartime China, the Nationalists were willing to connect the military effort against the invaders to their own project of state- and nation-building, and they were aware of the symbolic importance that assistance to wounded soldiers had in legitimising their government as well as in shaping a national community according to their vision. If the wounded soldiers were abandoned or forgotten, this would have suggested that their sacrifice for the nation was not worthy even in the eyes of the government and army leaders. Worse, it would have clearly shown that the new Chinese nation, as a community of citizens ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of the collective, did not exist, weakening all the propaganda efforts to drive collective resistance.

The name used to define wounded soldiers in Nationalist public discourse highlights the critical importance they had for propaganda. Defined as *rongyu junren* 荣誉军人 (honorary soldiers), they were

presented as the embodiment of the glory and honour of self-sacrifice for the nation, an honorific title that downplayed or even hid the physical and social misery of their actual status.

The Nationalist state's endorsement of the relief activities addressed to the 'honorary soldiers' is shown by the role played by high-ranking personalities and officers, such as the Chinese first lady Song Mei-ling 宋美齡, and by its connection with the New Life Movement (Cui 2008). As Song herself emphasised in 1944 (Song 1941, quoted in Lawrence 2004, 62), the care for wounded soldiers was directly connected to the spirit of the New Life Movement and its promotor Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石. In this speech, Song Mei-ling mentioned the Wounded Soldier League, whose role was to distribute Chiang Kai-shek's money to wounded officers and soldiers, as an example of the spirit expected to imbue the Chinese people's resistance against the Japanese.

On the same occasion, Song mentioned the Association of Friends of the Wounded Soldier, one of the most active state-connected organisations in support of those injured in war. This association was founded after the great fire of Changsha in 1938 thanks to the initiative of some Nationalist intellectuals and Western missionaries (*Shangbing zhi you yuekan* [hereafter *SBZY*] 1942), but it was officially established later, in 1940, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the New Life Movement. Its political and even institutional connections were enhanced by the choice of General Huang Renlin 黃仁霖 as Director. The formal directorate included all the most important leaders and personalities of the Nationalist Party, which publicly supported the association's goals.

The association was organised as a bureaucratic structure, as were several others of the New Life Movement's organisations. Service teams were established in the provinces and main cities, especially in the Southwestern provinces, such as Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan, where most of the activities in support of wounded soldiers arriving from the battlefield took place. Its activities included the opening of special guest-houses for wounded soldiers and the organisation of assistance in hospitals, providing the wounded with daily necessities, such as towels, toothbrushes, shoes, and fans (Jiang 2011). Moreover, volunteers were invited to help soldiers with their everyday hygiene and to engage in education and entertainment activities for those being assisted. According to Song Mei-ling, the association's

very name caught the imagination and heart of Chinese patriots. Figuring on the basis of 100,000 wounded soldiers in various army hospitals, the movement aimed at soliciting 100,000 'friends'. The goal of the campaign was to provide a 'friend' for each wounded soldier. To become a 'friend' one paid a friendship fee of \$ 1 or more, and pledged service to the wounded. By the end of the

month, the campaign had brought in no less than 654,774 'friends' with a total of \$ 1,332,505.74 in cash, which was 553 per cent over the top. (Song 1941, quoted in Lawrence 2004, 62)

As this quotation shows, the involvement of civilians in support of wounded soldiers primarily had a financial reason. Collecting funds served to relieve the state from the huge cost of the care for wounded soldiers. After the outbreak of the war, in October 1937, the Nationalist government had established a Central office for the management of wounded soldiers (*Zhongyang shangbing guanli chu* 中央伤兵管理处), later renamed the Central office for the honorary soldiers (*Rongyu junren guanli chu* 荣誉军人总管理处). This office was responsible for the organisation and management of several structures, such as shelters and camps (Wang 2013). The financial burden was significant, and the mobilisation of economic support from civil society was deemed essential.

In 1940, the same economic considerations were at the basis for the publication of an "Outline for a Plan of services for the honorary soldiers" (*Rongyu junren fuwu jihua gangyao* 荣誉军人服务计划纲要), whose goal was to promote the return to work of wounded soldiers, with the idea of making them self-sufficient and not reliant on state support (Wang 2013). In this plan too, the role of civilians was strategic in terms of supporting the education and training of the wounded and, where possible, facilitating their employment in factories, workshops and farms.

Financial needs, however, were not the only reason to engage civilians in this effort. The connection of the assistance for wounded soldiers to the New Life Movement implied that it was conceived and practised as a contribution to the process of nation-building (Gou 2008). The activities designed for this goal had to promote values and behaviours consistent with Chiang Kai-shek's vision of a disciplined and militarised society under the umbrella of the state. This was not only a medical or social task, but also a way of building a modern collective citizenship based on a new notion of 'friendship' as the glue for a new national community.

## 2 Building a Martial Citizenship Through Friendship

In Chinese culture, the notion of being a ‘friend’ (*you* 友) is complex, especially in Confucian philosophy, referring to the most important human relationship outside family bonds and state obligations (Wang 2017). Seen as a human connection that originates not through birth but as a consequence of circumstances and the outcome of personal choices and affinities, the idea of friendship usually includes an emotional bond as well as a utilitarian scope. True friends are expected to offer solidarity in material terms but also to practise mutual respect and to express affection; moreover, their role is not really seen as an alternative to or as countering other social institutions, such as the family or state, but rather as supporting the full realisation of the social role of the individual within a proper network of relations.

In modern China’s patriotic propaganda and public discourse, the notion of friendship hinted at promoting a feeling of reciprocal obligation towards individuals to whom one was not tied through family relationships. This obligation had to be fulfilled in the name of a shared and superior ideal of the nation and modern citizenship beyond the traditional family and the *natural* bonds of the clan. In this sense, friendship may hint at an idea of a national community rooted not in the metaphorical extension of *blood* but in the adherence to a shared set of values and commonality of intents.

The meaning of friendship as something to be nourished and practised by choice and virtue – expressed not only in moral and emotional terms, but also in material terms and ultimately directed towards supporting the wounded to fully achieve their role as active citizens – is clearly articulated in the list of “The Vows of the ‘Friends of the Wounded Soldiers’” (*Shangbing zhi you’ xintiao* ‘伤兵之友’ 信条) published in the war magazine *Huangpu jikan* in 1943 (*Huangpu jikan* 1943, 34).

The vows of the ‘Friends of the Wounded Soldiers’:

1. I will respect the wounded soldiers.
2. I will empathise with the wounded soldiers.
3. I will give money to the wounded soldiers.
4. I will pour my energy into supporting the wounded soldiers.
5. I will serve the wounded soldiers.
6. I will support the families of the wounded soldiers.
7. I will actively change the negative views of life of the wounded soldiers.
8. I will be a friend of the wounded soldiers forever.

As this text demonstrates, showing friendship towards soldiers who had been injured and maimed required emotional and practical engagement, while suggesting that a ‘friend’ had to help the receivers of friendship to remain full members of the national community. Re-



lief for the wounded was not only a practical need for sustaining the resistance efforts; it was also a self-educating practice addressed at forging a new community of values.

This articulation of friendship was rhetorically central to the narratives developed in the magazine of the Association of Friends of the Wounded Soldiers, *Shangbing zhi you*. This magazine was a monthly or half-monthly publication mainly addressed to the activists of the association. Activists were supposed to be mainly educated youth, such as students or teachers (Gou 2006), and the magazine was an instrument to help the organisation of work for supporting the wounded, especially in hospitals. At the same time, it represented a site where the educated élite articulated a public discourse regarding soldiers' place in society and their relationship with them.

The fact that the association was conceived as a place for interaction between soldiers and civilians was explicitly affirmed by Chiang Jingguo 蒋经国, who in a talk at the assembly of the association, later published in the magazine in 1940, claimed that the ultimate goal of the association was to unite soldiers and the people by recognising the wounded soldiers as honoured members of society and models of patriotism (*SBZY* 2, 1940). As another article emphasises (*SBZY* 14, 1942), differently from the past, modern war was not for the sake of kings but for the sake of the people of the nation: wounded soldiers were a national problem, and its solution required the participation of everyone, whether through financial aid or voluntary personal effort.

In the magazine's pages, the task of caring for wounded soldiers was detailed in several practical activities. The 'friends of the wounded soldiers' had to provide them with medicine, food and clothes, as well as taking care of their personal hygiene. Contemporary descriptions of the state of soldiers in hospitals make clear that the sanitary conditions were often dramatically bad (Watt 2013); consequently, the promotion of personal modern hygiene was of crucial importance during the war. The magazine offered several educational materials to be used to instruct activists and soldiers in modern hygienic rules for hospitals. But hygiene also included aesthetic standards, as it meant helping soldiers maintain a tidy and clean aspect, shaving their hair or cutting their nails. From this perspective, the practice of hygiene for the soldiers was connected to the goals of the New Life Movement, whose idea of national modernity reflected the appropriation of the colonial discourse on Chinese backwardness.

The will and capacity to carry on all these tasks was a manifestation of 'friendship' based on the relationship between the wounded and the caregivers. Soldiers had been eager to sacrifice their health and body for the sake of the people of the nation, just as good friends are ready to fight for the defence of one another. Now, as loyal friends, civilians should respect, honour and take care of the wounded who had placed their lives at risk (*SBZY* 14, 1942).

If fellow citizens were supposed to behave as good friends whose reciprocal relations were not opportunistic but based on loyalty and moral obligations, there should be no hierarchy in this relationship, and both parties were considered equal. Nevertheless, the notion of 'friendship' did not totally exclude an attitude, as friends were thought to be able to give advice and support in order to make the receivers of their attention fully achieve their potential social roles. Thus, the general discourse about soldiers was also shaped by a paternalistic attitude that implicitly hinted at the great divide existing between the educated élite and the wounded soldiers.

In this respect, it is worth noting that one of the main activities required from the members of the association was to educate the soldiers, as education was a prerequisite for modern citizenship. Wounded soldiers were expected to be honoured and respected by everyone, but embodying the heroism of the Chinese nation, they also had to constitute a model for all society because of their courage, patriotism and higher sense of morality (*SBZY* 13, 1941). As several articles in the magazine suggest, the gap between this ideal and the reality was rather huge. The magazine prompted activists to acknowledge and address the problem that wounded soldiers' attitudes and behaviours were often distant from the ideal image that the war propaganda wanted to offer. Coming from poor villages, often not educated, shocked by the war and still tied to the superstitions and habits of the rural world, it was not an easy task to make them behave in ways that lived up to the standards promoted by the propaganda. The acknowledgment that soldiers could not actually be the purest embodiment of martial virtues might somehow weaken both their potential value for patriotic education and the likelihood that the magazine's audience would emotionally identify the soldiers as symbols of a new and modern nation. This also hinted at a class division that war could not conceal. Whereas ordinary soldiers had mostly a rural background, relief for the wounded was mainly conceived as a way in which urban and educated élites could be directly involved in the war. Offering more than material support, friends were actually invited to educate the soldiers. Several comments in the magazine pointed out how the low educational level and the rural background of most of the Chinese soldiers made this goal quite challenging (*SBZY* 3, 1940). Honorary soldiers were peasants who did not know what war they were fighting, nor did they know anything about the Three Principles of the People of Sun Yat-sen. They were like children, always complaining, pretending and quarrelling about trivial things. Maybe they were loyal to their battalion and commanders, but they were not capable of conceiving of China as a nation or of their role and duties as fighting citizens.

Interestingly, the war propaganda's discourse identified the violence of the conflict as the main cause of the soldiers' inferior and backward status. Caregivers and supportive readers had to be aware

that the injuries suffered by the soldiers were not only in their bodies but also in their psyches. The violence of the Japanese was a trauma that 'loyal friends' (i.e. the association's members) were called to consider and to heal. It was this trauma that impeded the soldiers from being the honoured members of society and models of heroic citizenship that they were expected to be. The experience of the war had first made many injured soldiers undisciplined and not respectful of authority; second, they now often indulged in vices, such as drinking, betting or going to prostitutes; third, they were often depressed and apathetic (*SBZY* 3, 1940). They not only had to be cured from the physical consequences of their injuries; they also required help in developing a better awareness of their roles and in comprehending the true significance of their sacrifices. The propaganda argument that the violence inflicted on the Chinese people and soldiers by the Japanese was the main cause of the honorary soldiers' incapacity to live up to the moral and physical standards required of them by modern citizenship, aimed at rejecting the idea that the Chinese common people were incapable of being truly modern as well as at emphasising the authority of the educated élite in popular education.

In their magazine, the 'friends' suggested that the education of wounded soldiers was intended to 'militarise' their lives once more, as their suffering and the shock of the war had driven them to forget that they were soldiers and heroes. Reflecting the New Life Movement's goals, several articles recommend that activists organise military discipline for the wounded, forcing them to take care of their bodies and health and to respect hygiene rules and training practices. Moreover, the wounded had to be educated and entertained in a healthy manner, which meant being exposed to intensive nationalistic and ideological propaganda through the means of songs and tales. Basic slogans and notions were duly reported on in the magazine's pages: they should learn first that they were soldiers and that their duty was to defend the country and protect the people; second, that their leader was Chiang Kai-shek; and third, that their country was the Republic of China (*SBZY* 3, 1940). However, in detailing the activities and educational content that had to be addressed to the soldiers, the magazine framed the relief addressed to the wounded within Nationalist China's broader hegemonic educational and propaganda enterprise. According to the New Life Movement's values, civilians and soldiers alike all had to be educated in order to become disciplined citizens, abiding by the same set of martial virtues - spirit of sacrifice and loyalty to the leader and the state -, and obeying the collective interest. However, those who really embodied the new social and cultural values of the nation were the educated friends rather than the poor and rural 'honorary soldiers'. From this perspective, the war relief work under the aegis of the state highlighted the project of a militarised citizenship in service of the nation in which the

suffering and maimed bodies and minds of wounded soldiers were just the battlefield for the Nationalists' attempt to reshape and engage Chinese educated élites' attitudes towards the state.

### 3 Conclusions

During the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression from 1937 to 1945, Chinese Nationalist propaganda worked to produce a new imaginary of modern China, centred on the emergence of a national community that was forged by the war, inspired by martial and heroic values and characterised by self-discipline and solidarity. In this endeavour, the distinction between soldiers and civilians was blurred, reflecting the centrality assumed by the notion of 'martial citizenship', whose distinctive trait was the willingness to serve the nation in the first person and to contribute to the resistance efforts under the aegis of the state. This was a vision that predated the war, as it was consistent with the goals of the New Life Movement, whose activities from 1937 onwards were increasingly connected to the mobilisation of civilians in support of the state and the army.

The relief work addressed to the wounded soldiers represented an important field for achieving this goal. On the one hand, this was because the Nationalist government was quite aware that the contribution of the educated and affluent class was economically and culturally necessary to support the state's relief efforts; on the other hand, this relief work represented a symbolic point of conjunction between the military and civil life. Wounded soldiers were still soldiers, and they were called to embody the Chinese people's capacity to sacrifice themselves for the sake of national salvation. Nevertheless, as they were unable to go back to the front, they were also close to the civilians as non-combatants; worse, they were weak and fragile persons in need of help in a time of scarce resources, deprived of the support of their own families and communities.

As a reading of the magazine *Friends of the Wounded Soldiers* suggests, the duty of solidarity between wounded soldiers and civilians was articulated by Nationalist propaganda in terms of 'friendship', hinting at a relationship between the caregiver and the assisted that connoted a shared experience, emotional bonds and the duty to offer material support. Emphasising friendship, the state aimed at forging a sense of reciprocal obligations among strangers, reflecting how the war was seen at the same time as a disruption of existing social and familiar networks and as the opportunity to redesign a new society based on the Nationalists' vision of a militarised modernity.

However, it is also worth noting how the same narratives suggest that the call to friendship could not really aim at crossing social and cultural boundaries. The work in support of the wounded soldiers

was certainly a reflection of the attempt to give the uneducated rural population, which was the bulk of the army, full recognition as worthy and honoured members of the new national community. However, above all, it was a way to shape élites' attitudes towards the war, educate them regarding their responsibility for the state's goals and co-opt them into the New Life Movement.

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