CRACKING DOWN ON REVOLUTIONARY ZEAL AND VIOLENCE

Local Dynamics and Early Colonial Responses to the Independence Struggle in Indochina and the Indonesian Archipelago, 1945–1947

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Both Indonesia and Vietnam suffered tremendously during the Second World War. That suffering compounded decades—centuries in some places in Indonesia—of exploitation, humiliation, and torment under colonial rule. Soon after Japan formally surrendered to the Allies on 15 August 1945, new cycles of violence engulfed both Indonesia and Indochina. Internecine at first, the violence increased as the French and Dutch undertook efforts to recolonize what they still considered theirs. Consistent with past practice, both colonial powers manipulated and exploited existing cleavages among the indigenous population and created new ones to meet their ends. The tendency of their armed forces to resort frequently to acts of extreme violence, and their rationale for these acts, are focal points of this comparative study.

Interestingly, few works have compared the experiences of Indonesia and Vietnam in the immediate postwar period.1 Analyzing those experiences in tandem, Stein Tønnesson has argued that the power vacuum that followed Japan’s surrender allowed revolutionary regimes to seize power in both Java and Hanoi. As neither Paris nor The Hague was prepared to part ways with its Southeast Asian colony, conflict ensued.2 This study builds on Tønnesson’s work. It assesses comparatively the causes, nature, and direction of the violence perpetrated by all sides following the new revolutionary authorities’ declaration of independence in Indonesia and Vietnam. The comparative analysis allows us to better grasp the violent dynamics in both countries in the period 1945–1947. This chapter first attempts to explain local outbursts of violence against certain segments of the indigenous population by local forces in each country right after their respective
declarations. Who was primarily responsible for that violence in each case and to what extent was it embedded in and informed by former colonial structures and the recent Japanese occupation? Subsequently, we turn to the diverging effects of the intervention by the British military forces, who occupied parts of both countries as agreed by the Allies during the Potsdam Conference (17 July–2 August 1945). Did their presence after September 1945 attenuate or exacerbate the violence? Ultimately and most importantly, we assess how the violence in both Indonesia and Vietnam reached new, “extreme” heights following the return en force of the French and Dutch.

This chapter demonstrates that virtual statelessness in Indonesia and a much better organized, but still weak communist state in Vietnam produced bloody contestations for power in which extreme violence against noncombatants became a tactical means, used by all sides, for achieving strategic objectives. It also shows that while some of the parallels between the two cases are striking, the process in each state was unique, owing to different styles of revolutionary governance, diverging international contexts, and different colonial potentials.

The Japanese Occupation and Its Aftermath

Japanese rule impacted Indonesia and Vietnam in profound and meaningful ways. It proved not only oppressive and violent in the extreme, but also produced famine that claimed the lives of millions in each nation. At the same time, the occupation variously enabled, emboldened, and strengthened indigenous nationalists. In addition to halting Western colonial control—in March 1942 in Indonesia and March 1945 in Vietnam—Japan created conditions conducive to assertions of limited self-governance and partial autonomy. The latter gave Indonesians and Vietnamese an unshakable aspiration to independence and sovereignty. The occupation also caused the balance of power in Indochina and Indonesia to change dramatically after the Second World War. The Japanese occupation of Indonesia resulted in years of detention under abominable circumstances for forty-two thousand military personnel of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), as well as one hundred thousand Dutch civilians, including an increasing section of the Eurasian community in the course of the war.

Asians tended to welcome the Japanese as liberators. Soon, however, it became obvious the Japanese were not inclined to facilitate the national movement or independence. On Java, Japanese military leaders initially bet on the Indonesian urban middle classes to win popular support following the overthrow of Dutch rule. This policy failed because urban leaders were unable to reach the rural masses. In 1944–1945, when the military situation of the Japanese was seriously
weakened, a mass mobilization of youth, labor, and resources was implemented in Java through the indigenous Javanese administrative elite. In total, almost two million young men were mobilized and received military training. Notions of discipline, sacrifice, and an anti-Western fighting spirit became important elements of their mental and physical outlook and increased their willingness to fight. As indigenous administrative elites thus played a crucial mediating role, nationalist leaders joined Japanese propaganda efforts to mobilize the labor force. The Japanese increased forced rice deliveries, sometimes up to 70 percent of the harvest. The forced rice deliveries were badly managed but enriched local administrators and Chinese middlemen.\(^4\) In total, ten million men were put to work as *romusha* (“volunteers”) under appalling labor conditions. Malnutrition, exhaustion, and illness were widespread; thousands died. Aggravated by bad harvests and the breakdown of the transportation system, famines caused the death of approximately 2.5 million people in Java.\(^5\) Social dislocation, economic hardship, and deep resentment toward corrupt administrative elites and Chinese middlemen became an explosive mixture in the hands of mobilized militias.

For years the Japanese in Indochina worked alongside the pro-Vichy French colonial authorities and ignored Vietnamese aspirations to independence. Desperate to muster more support locally as they faced mounting challenges in the Pacific War, the Japanese overthrew the French colonial government on 9 March 1945. In a *coup de force* that day, they disarmed French military and police forces, incarcerated upper-echelon civilian and military leaders, and confined to their barracks rank-and-file colonial troops of European descent. In approximately two days, the Japanese fulfilled the greatest aspiration of indigenous sovereignists, realized three years earlier in Indonesia: suppression of the European colonial system. That same month, as they created the Investigative Committee for Indonesian Independence in the archipelago, the Japanese authorized the Vietnamese to form their own ostensibly autonomous government under Emperor Bao Dai to govern the presumably sovereign Empire of Vietnam. As it turned out, the new government was nothing more than a puppet regime loyal to the Japanese, who dictated its foreign policy and remained in charge of internal security. When a severe famine hit Tonkin and parts of Annam, Bao Dai’s government was unable to react or even persuade the Japanese to help. The famine claimed nearly two million Vietnamese lives and generated an upswell of anger toward the Japanese and their local collaborators.\(^6\)

Following Japan’s surrender on 15 August, a power vacuum ensued in both Indonesia and Vietnam. All major actors on Java were taken by surprise; nationalist leaders were not prepared to take control. Instead, the initiative was taken by young radical and impatient revolutionary militants (*pemuda*) who distrusted senior nationalist leaders like Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta because of their
close cooperation with the Japanese. The _pemuda_ actually pressured Sukarno and Hatta to proclaim the independence of the Republic of Indonesia on 17 August 1945. The Republican leadership appointed throughout the archipelago local National Committees (KNI) consisting of moderate nationalists and experienced local administrators, and created formal Security Forces (BKR). As it turned out, most of the committees had little authority, while the emerging Security Forces were unable to prevent outbursts of violence.

Meanwhile in Vietnam, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) under Ho Chi Minh launched its bid for power the moment Japan surrendered to the Allies. It instigated the “August Revolution,” an effort to rouse the masses and secure complete control of state institutions. On 24 August, the ICP and the military united front it had set up in 1941, the Vietminh (abbreviated from _Viet Nam Doc lap Dong minh_, or League for the Independence of Vietnam), compelled Bao Dai to abdicate. The revolution culminated on 2 September 1945, when Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam and the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). Ho claimed the new government represented all major political currents in Vietnam. In reality, committed communists held most cabinet positions. That was not lost on noncommunist nationalists and the Allies.

**The Revolution Turns Violent**

No sooner had independence been declared in Vietnam and Indonesia than violence ensued. That violence was at first largely internecine and fratricidal. Within days after Sukarno declared Indonesia’s independence, young militant revolutionaries formed local militias, or _badan perdjuangan_ (fighting units), in many cities and smaller towns in Java. Most of these groups were autonomous and operated beyond the control of the Republican leadership. These groups were a new phenomenon, with membership consisting largely of young men who had been members of Japanese militias. They were driven by a new revolutionary spirit (although existing criminal gangs also started to operate under the banner of the revolution). Most _badan perdjuangan_ distrusted institutionalized authorities and clustered around charismatic, fatherlike leaders. Their drive for political independence was closely linked to a desire for individual freedom. Their role models were a mix of traditional Javanese strongmen (_jago_), Japanese samurai, and the cowboys (_koboi_) from American western movies. Living dangerously was a core feature of their outlook, and “blood” a key word in their vocabulary. Taken together these militias embodied a new revolutionary vitality characterized by impatience and action, best summarized in the famous phrase by the poet Chairil Anwar: “I want to live another thousand years.” The militias took possession of
public spaces, controlled neighborhoods, and considered a free ride in public transport as their natural right.\textsuperscript{7}

The violent operations initiated by these militias showed a similar pattern in the cities Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, and Surabaya. They first clashed with Eurasian youths from within the part of the Eurasian community that had not been interned in Japanese camps and had felt humiliated by nationalist Indonesian youngsters. Soon after the Japanese surrendered, these Eurasians formed groups that took to the streets and celebrated in provocative ways the anticipated restoration of the former colonial order. They were often joined by small sections of colonial soldiers just returned from Japanese POW camps in Siam. This led to skirmishes and gang-like violence. The first colonial administrators of the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) arriving in the wake of the British troops in late September exacerbated existing tensions. These uniformed NICA officers were accompanied by a small contingent of metropolitan Dutch troops, who were soon strengthened by newly formed military units made up of additional released prisoners of war. These European, Eurasian, Moluccan, and Menadonese troops would form the nucleus of the reemerging Royal Netherlands East Indies Army.\textsuperscript{8} Partly in response to these developments, pemuda militias started to kidnap, murder, and mutilate Eurasians and Europeans, and intimidated their indigenous servants, warning them to stay away. They insisted that shopkeepers bar European customers. The militias also attacked Indonesians they suspected of cooperating with the NICA. Europeans and Eurasians later labeled this bloody period in late 1945 and early 1946 the bersiap, a term derived from the prewar Boy Scout call “be prepared” used by young nationalists as a battle cry.\textsuperscript{9}

From the start, the nature of this violence was deeply embedded in the former colonial order structured by racial differences. By deliberately attacking Europeans and Eurasians, as well as Chinese accused of collaborating with both the Dutch and Japanese for material gain, the militias sent a clear message that there was no place for these populations in an independent Indonesia. While Moluccan and Menadonese elite colonial soldiers were driven mainly by a growing fear of losing their privileges in a postcolonial order, Eurasian gangs also wanted to defend their precarious racial superiority vis-à-vis the “native” revolutionaries. The Chinese, for their part, realized that they were no longer embedded in a colonial structure which had offered them economic privileges and protection.

The level of violence increased as the reemerging colonial forces in cities like Jakarta and Surabaya started to assert their authority beyond the control of the British occupation forces. Like the actions of Eurasian youth gangs, their intimidating displays of violence, which were reminiscent of the colonial past, further provoked violent pemuda responses. Pemuda in turn managed to obtain large
quantities of Japanese weapons, which also heightened the level of violence. An American liaison officer to the British forces complained about “roving patrols of trigger-happy Ambonese [Moluccan] and Dutch soldiers” driving around Batavia in open trucks shooting at anything suspicious, abducting, and torturing. Units of often-vengeful ex–prisoners of war made many Indonesian victims. They even attempted to kill moderate Indonesian prime minister Sutan Sjahrir and his foreign secretary, Mohammed Roem. The British authorities decided to disarm some of these units because of their undisciplined behavior. They also barred what were feared to be poorly trained and undisciplined Dutch troops from deploying on Java and Sumatra for several months. This concerned both units of former POWs and battalions of the metropolitan army.10

While large parts of Java thus fell into lawlessness and chaos, Ho Chi Minh’s new regime endeavored to avoid a similar plunge into anarchy in Vietnam. Proclaiming independence had been easy; consolidating the authority of the new government proved far more challenging. Though it claimed jurisdiction over all of Vietnam, the DRVN struggled to assert its authority in the southern half of the country. There were two reasons for this. First, the communist footprint there remained very light, even after Ho proclaimed independence. Second, and perhaps most important, a number of noncommunist nationalist factions, abundant in southern Vietnam, actively resisted the new government because they saw it for what it was, an ICP front. In northern Vietnam, the DRVN’s staunchest opponents were members of the Nationalist Party of Vietnam (Viet Nam Quoc dan Dang, or VNQDD), modeled after the Chinese Guomindang (GMD). That party had had successfully reconstituted itself and developed a respectable following since its decimation by the French in the early 1930s.11 Based in Yunnan, China, during the Second World War, it enjoyed close ties to, as well as support from, Chiang Kai-shek’s government. The Vietnamese Revolutionary League (Viet Nam Cach menh Dong minh Hoi, or Viet Cach), a loose coalition of political organizations and united fronts formed in 1942 and formally allied with the GMD, also opposed the DRVN, as did the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, both fiercely independent religious sects with their own militias based in the deep South.12

Limiting the influence and activities of these and other opponents while preparing for the possible return of the French was the strategic priority of Ho’s government after 2 September 1945. Following lengthy deliberations, Ho and other ICP leaders resolved to liquidate leaders of “reactionary” organizations and movements and other “traitors” (Viet gian). They sanctioned the formation of specialized counterrevolutionary units, or “killers’ committees” as the French labeled them, to that end. At first, the units targeted mostly former ranking officials in the Nguyen court and the Bao Dai government, Trotskyists, members of the Viet Cach, and leaders of religious factions snubbing the DRVN.13 Pro-French
The British Factor

The British occupations of Indonesia and Indochina had been envisaged along more or less similar lines, but they evolved in a very different ways. British-Indian units landed on Java and Sumatra with the assignment to evacuate and secure all European civilian internees and Allied POWs and supervise the repatriation of over 250,000 Japanese troops, 73,000 of whom were stationed on Java. In the end, they needed three divisions (amounting to 65,000 men in February 1946) to fulfill this mission. The British acted as temporary Western caretakers with a limited assignment. Given the clear signs of a massive nationalist movement opposing the return of Dutch rule and the limited means they had at their disposal, the British decided to seize only the “key areas” of Jakarta-Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, and Medan on Sumatra. Upon his arrival in Jakarta on 29 September, British force commander Lieutenant General Philip Christison announced that he had no intention to occupy the rest of Java and Sumatra. He added that he hoped for negotiations to start between the Dutch and Indonesians and that he

schorl and former imperial minister of education Pham Quynh, pro-Japanese civil servant Ngo Dinh Khoi (future Republic of Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem’s older brother), and Khoi’s son Ngo Dinh Huan were among the first victims of post-independence communist violence. Trotskyite leader Ta Thu Thau met his demise in Quang Ngai shortly after. “He was a patriot and we mourn him,” Ho allegedly affirmed later, “but all those who don’t follow the course I chart will be broken.”

Communist agents murdered moderate political figure Bui Quang Chieu on 29 September.

For effect, some ICP/DRVN executions were public. Following an anticommunist demonstration organized in early September by the Hoa Hao, DRVN “policemen” tracked down and arrested the organizers, plus thousands of adherents. A month later, the regime executed publicly four Hoa Hao leaders at a soccer stadium. The same fate awaited the sect’s founder and spiritual guide, Huynh Phu So, but he escaped (he was captured and executed two years later). The ICP dispatched in the name of the DRVN several thousand “enemies” in September 1945 alone.

Public terror effectively became a normal part of the Vietnamese communist struggle against domestic rivals. ICP-sponsored extreme violence against these and other noncombatants did little to improve the DRVN’s prospects. On the contrary, it undermined its legitimacy domestically and abroad and prompted calls for the resumption of French colonial control from both Europeans in Vietnam and Vietnamese themselves. Within weeks after its creation, the DRVN was a state in name only as civil war ensued.
expected the Japanese as well as the Indonesian authorities to maintain peace and order. This de facto recognition of the new Indonesian Republic gave local revolutionaries a boost and infuriated the Dutch.

The institutional weakness of the Republic, the retreat of the Japanese, the absence of the Dutch, and the late arrival and reluctant presence of the British initiated a period of statelessness in much of Java and Sumatra, which would last until April/May 1946, when Dutch troops started to arrive. This enabled young militant leaders to initiate violent local revolutions beyond the control of the Republican leadership in Jakarta and the British forces, as related earlier. After the arrival of the British, the Japanese started to retreat to their barracks. In early October, Japanese army leaders in Surabaya handed over almost all their military equipment to the pemuda. In Bandung and Semarang, however, Japanese troops followed British orders to maintain "peace and order," which led to violent confrontations with pemuda militias. Japanese violence in one place inspired pemuda in others to take revenge, claiming hundreds of lives on both sides. Later, this pattern of escalation was repeated when British troops clashed with pemuda militias. Observing the heated atmosphere in Java, President Sukarno warned British commander Christison on 9 October: "When mob psychology replaces ideological arguments, who is going to guarantee the safety of Dutch and Eurasian noncombatants?" He was right. Over the next few days, dozens of Eurasians were killed in Depok, just south of Jakarta. British troops arrived just in time to prevent a bigger massacre. Republican leaders were anxious to contain the local violence, which seriously damaged their international reputation. Although they failed to prevent outbreaks of violence, they did succeed in organizing a mass detention of forty-six thousand Eurasians, primarily men and boys, in the second part of October, thus preventing more bloodshed.

Two weeks before Christison’s arrival on Java, British forces under Major General Douglas Gracey landed in Saigon to manage the repatriation of Japanese forces in Vietnam below the sixteenth parallel. The British contingent of eighteen hundred Indian and Gurkha troops would eventually grow to a force of more than sixteen thousand. Two days after the arrival of the first British troops, a detachment of the French 5th RIC (régiment d’infanterie coloniale) landed in Saigon. Gracey welcomed the detachment because he and his superiors believed the claim by French intelligence services that the Vietnamese were eager for the resumption of colonial control. Besides, Admiral Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia, had promised the French that he would do his best to look after their interests in the region, and Gracey had no intention of letting him down.

Although his mandate was the same as Christison’s on Java, Gracey took a different approach in practice. He refused to recognize the authority of the DRVN,
which he saw as a Japanese creation and puppet, and made no effort to arrange talks between Ho’s regime and the French after his arrival. Conversely, he recognized the jurisdiction of and met regularly with the new local commissioner appointed by Paris, Jean Cédile. Gracey also released approximately five thousand French colonial troops of the Cochinchina-Cambodia Division previously interned by the Japanese, and proceeded to rearm as many of them as he could because he was desperate for reinforcements. On Java and Sumatra, the British only started to allow Dutch reinforcements in from March 1946, after the Dutch-Indonesian negotiations with the Republic got under way. Essentially, Gracey fulfilled his mandate of repatriating Japanese troops while enabling the French to resume colonial control. Gracey’s refusal to engage Ho’s government and recognize the authority of the DRVN dismayed ICP loyalists. For others, however, namely noncommunist nationalists, the British position vis-à-vis the DRVN was heartening. Chinese Nationalist general Lu Han, responsible for managing the repatriation of Japanese forces in Vietnam above the sixteenth parallel, not only adopted the same obstructionist stance as Gracey toward Ho and the DRVN; he actively supported their detractors, the VNQDD in particular, and leaned on Ho to welcome noncommunists into his government. GMD support for enemies of the DRVN compounded the problems faced by Ho’s government and amplified political cleavages among Vietnamese.

France Returns to Vietnam

By the time Ho declared Vietnamese independence, Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, had already started enacting his plan to recolonize Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. De Gaulle appointed two loyal servants with staunch colonial attitudes to serve his aims: Admiral Thierry d’Argenlieu as high commissioner for French Indochina, and General Philippe Leclerc as supreme commander of French forces in the Far East (Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient, CEFO). As Gracey’s actions indicated, the Allies were behind de Gaulle, including the United States. Franklin Roosevelt had been opposed to the resumption of both French and Dutch colonial rule, but Washington sang to a different tune by the time the Second World War ended. President Harry Truman fully approved the continuation of French sovereignty to ensure postwar regional stability.

As Vietnam sank deeper into lawlessness, anarchy, and civil war, unknown perpetrators loosely affiliated with the ICP assassinated French residents in Saigon and elsewhere. That created “an almost hysterical fear of the Vietnamese,” as well as “an intense hatred and desire for revenge” among Europeans, who until then
had nervously and passively observed events. Heeding the pleas for intervention from the local settler population, Paris kicked its recolonization campaign into high gear during the last week of September 1945. “We must demonstrate our might and our resolve to use it” to convince “indigenous public opinion that France has no intent to renounce either its obligations or its rights,” French military authorities noted. Displays of military strength were deemed essential in the countryside, since peasants were “gullible, easy to manipulate, and always ready to cower before those they judge to be mightiest.” Independence was not an option, because it was deemed that, for the time being, Vietnamese lacked the maturity to rule themselves. Beyond these considerations, the use of force was vital “for the sake of our prestige,” French military authorities concluded.

**FIGURE 4.1** Security forces in French service guard a bridge over the Saigon River during the early revolutionary period in Indochina, October 1945. (© Imperial War Museum [SE 5170])
The 5th RIC and newly liberated, rearmed, and indignant colonial troops of the 11th RIC spurred into action on 23 September, staging a coup de force in Saigon. They took over administrative buildings and posts, effectively ousting the DRVN as presiding authority. Gracey, convinced that restoration of French rule was necessary to implement occupation tasks, did nothing to stop them. By the official French account, the coup was really a “police action” sanctioned by Allied authorities. Coming as it did shortly after savage retaliation against protesters and insurgents in Syria and Algeria in May, the 23 September coup in Saigon marked the third time in 1945 that France initiated a war of recolonization. As in Damascus and Sétif/Guelma, French colonial troops and settlers, finally freed from the fear and uncertainty that had plagued them for months, sought payback. They lashed out at the Vietnamese, by many accounts taking pleasure in mistreating the most helpless among them. Armed European gangs ran “amok” in some neighborhoods, brutally beating innocent Vietnamese. A mob even attacked a French woman supportive of Vietnamese independence, shaving off her hair as had been done after the liberation of France to females who had collaborated or cavorted with Germans. This “outbreak of serious violence” perpetrated by “poorly-disciplined” Europeans was a harbinger of the systemic extreme violence against innocent civilians that was to come. The French abided humiliation by the Germans during the Second World War; they could not, however, accept the same from Asians, and thus responded in kind the moment conditions permitted. “Primitively” detained in barracks after the 9 March coup, white colonial troops sought to erase their moral inferiority vis-à-vis counterparts newly arrived from France the moment they were released and rearmed.

In the early morning hours of 25 September, armed bands of Vietnamese sneaked past Japanese guards and entered the tiny French enclave called Cité Hérault, located in a suburb of Saigon, and kidnapped dozens of Europeans. According to survivors’ testimonies, the captors thereafter subjected their victims to “incredible sadism,” “unspeakable tortures,” and “sickening cruelty.” Among the victims was an eight-month pregnant young woman who was allegedly “raped repeatedly, disemboweled (her fetus served as a football), and finished off in atrocious fashion.” In one particularly disturbing instance, “human sacrifices were consumed.”

The incident riled Europeans against the Vietnamese. Even teachers and professors turned against the local population, threatening to go on strike if they were entrusted Vietnamese students. French military authorities resolved that a dramatic “display of force” was essential to “calm the Annamites.” The need to demonstrate resolve, on the one hand, and the desire to avenge compatriots killed in Vietnamese mob violence, on the other, encouraged French troops to show little mercy toward Vietnamese, including noncombatants, thereafter. Indeed,
massacres of innocent civilians, “disgraceful scenes of vengeance against helpless Annamites,” became defining features of the French recolonization effort long before the actual onset of the so-called Franco-Vietminh War in December 1946. Burning and confiscating personal property, beating and humiliating men, raping women and girls, bombarding villages, and executing prisoners à l’improvisée were among the more odious acts perpetrated regularly and frequently by French troops after September 1945.42

On 5 October, reinforcements under General Leclerc arrived in Saigon. Within weeks, forces under his command grew to seventeen thousand. With a military force the size the Dutch could only dream of in this phase, Leclerc was able to reclaim all of Saigon and its periphery. The rapid pace of events heartened the general. In light of its “unfortunate experience” under DRVN authority, the Vietnamese population would surely understand that despite certain inconveniences French imperialism was “above all synonymous with order and peace.”43 Reports from Tonkin (northern Vietnam) that indigenous colonial troops were reintegrating their units as civil servants resumed their duties and shopkeepers once again sold to French clients prompted French military intelligence to conclude that the mere rumor that France was still powerful in the South was enough to initiate this reversal in Tonkin. Once France demonstrated this same power in the North, “submission of the Tonkinese will become reality.”44

D’Argenlieu arrived in Saigon on 30 October 1945 intent on promptly reasserting French sovereignty over the rest of Indochina. Success in that endeavor hinged on “demonstrating force,” he believed.45 Leclerc fully agree. “Everyone who knows Indochina agrees that the presence of well-trained and armed troops will cause a swift change of attitude among all hostile elements,” the CEFEO commander thought. “Everything in this Indochinese affair could be solved by French forces with adequate French means,” he noted.46

For both d’Argenlieu and Leclerc, diplomacy was not an option until France achieved a position of absolute strength—that is, until it militarily dominated the situation.47 Negotiating before French forces had a chance to demonstrate their strength and determination, both men believed, was counterproductive to their strategy. Besides, d’Argenlieu and Leclerc considered the DRVN an illegitimate puppet regime beholden not to Japan, as Gracey thought, but to Moscow and the socialist camp.48 Even if France attempted negotiating with Ho’s government, it could not hope to reach any agreement because Ho and his comrades “have always been our enemies.”49 Creating a loyal indigenous government to rival Ho’s own, an idea floated by politicians in Paris, was equally unpalatable to d’Argenlieu and Leclerc because it would signal a lack of resolve and undermine if not derail entirely the recolonization project as they envisioned it.50 “Negotiations with Yellows are a pure illusion,” d’Argenlieu surmised.51 At the limit,
d’Argenlieu and Leclerc were prepared to consider the Philippine model of the Americans, consisting of a gradual transfer of power to indigenous authorities culminating in independence at the end of thirty years.52 “The last absurdity would be to consider Indochina today as a country [pays] ripe for independence,” Leclerc explained.53 French military authorities were so convinced of the impossibility of negotiations with Ho that they tried to assassinate him.54 Luckily for d’Argenlieu and Leclerc, Gracey never stood in their way nor insist that France engage in talks with Ho and his government, unlike Christison, who demanded the Dutch do just that with Sukarno and Hatta.

By the start of 1946 the French forces had successfully “pacified” much of southern Vietnam. There remained pockets of resistance, but the authority of Ho’s government, shaky to begin with, had for all intents and purposes been erased.55 Thereafter, d’Argenlieu and Leclerc set their sight on northern Vietnam. The first obstacle they had to overcome was Chinese Nationalist forces occupying Vietnam above the sixteenth parallel. Unlike the British, the Chinese were not amenable to the resumption of French colonial control. After lengthy negotiations, the two sides arrived at a solution. By the terms of a 28 February 1946 agreement, Paris surrendered all concessions in China in exchange for the right to deploy its armies in northern Vietnam as China’s own withdrew. Despite some tensions, including one major altercation between French and Chinese Nationalist forces in Haiphong, the two sides honored the agreement. That, plus a separate agreement on 6 March between Ho’s government and the French, negotiated under pressure from Chinese military authorities, paved the way for French forces to enter northern Vietnam.

No sooner had the last of Chiang Kai-shek’s troops departed and Leclerc’s forces moved in in early spring 1946 than French troops displayed the same aggressiveness and brutality toward noncombatants in northern Vietnam as they had in the South. As they took position in and around Hanoi, French troops ransacked the homes of and savagely beat Vietnamese known to harbor pro-independence sentiments. This was not a case of soldiers gone rogue. To the contrary, such behavior was entirely consistent with orders issued by military authorities in Indochina. Military Directive No. 1, dated 6 April 1946, consisting of a code of conduct for CEFEO forces in Tonkin, sanctioned violence against noncombatants as a means of deterring attacks against French nationals and interests, on the one hand, and progressively reestablishing “the prestige and authority of the French army,” on the other.56 The directive and subsequent instructions that were similarly worded caused excessive violence against civilians to accrue over time. According to Vietnamese testimonies, during a French sweep in Hon Gay on 8 July 1946 entire neighborhoods were “systematically reduced to ashes,” and hundreds of innocent civilians were beaten, tortured, shot,
“beheaded, drowned or burned alive.” Several women were raped, some repeatedly, as children were thrown alive into burning fires.57

The French propensity for using extreme violence against civilians reached a culmination of sorts in Haiphong in the fall of 1946. Concerned about the infiltration of Chinese contrabands, including weapons, into Vietnam, d’Argenlieu ordered a naval blockade of northern ports. The blockade angered DRVN authorities, responsible for managing ports under the terms of the 6 March 1946 agreement. Tensions escalated rapidly thereafter. As troops and paramilitary forces loyal to Ho Chi Minh and his government clashed with the French with increased frequency, French general Jean-Étienne Valluy decided to take forceful and, above all, symbolic action. Valluy, who replaced Leclerc as CEFEO commander in July 1946 after the latter angered d’Argenlieu by revising his stance on negotiations and supporting diplomatic engagement of the DRVN, was as tough, single-minded, and racist as French officers came. The time had come to “teach a tough lesson” to those refusing to submit to French authority, he instructed his subordinates from his Saigon headquarters. The CEFEO must at once take control of Haiphong “by all means at your disposal,” he instructed.58 In a series of separate instructions, Valluy specified that the conquest of Haiphong must be “brutal” and the fight against those who resisted “without mercy.”59

Colonel Pierre-Louis Debès commanded French troops in Haiphong. Debès was an “extremist” who hated the Vietnamese and loved using excessive force against them, Division Commander Louis Morlière confessed later. Like Valluy, Debès was convinced the Vietnamese understood only the language of force. He was a “brawler,” according to Morlière, “a friend of disorder to reprehensible ends.”60 Following previous patterns of behavior and Debès’s own instructions, the CEFEO set out to resolve the Haiphong crisis by targeting civilians. Between 23 and 28 November 1946, French forces acting on orders from Debès approved by Valluy indiscriminately and callously bombarded and strafed sections of Haiphong populated by Vietnamese in an operation tellingly called “Enfer” (hell).61 As they did so, they carefully avoided damage and offered assistance to neighborhoods inhabited by European, Chinese, and other non-Vietnamese residents. Estimates on the number of Vietnamese civilians killed during Enfer range between five hundred and twenty thousand. French sociologist and anti-war activist Paul Mus claimed, based on an official report he saw, that six thousand civilians died in the attack. Historian Stein Tønnesson, who has conducted the most exhaustive study of the matter, concluded without providing numbers that “the casualties must be counted in the thousands, and most of them were civilians.” In hindsight, he writes, it is reasonable to call the attack on Haiphong a massacre that served its purposes, as it enabled French forces to take control of the main gateway into Tonkin in five days with minimal losses.62
The carnage did not end there. No sooner had Haiphong fallen to the French than Valluy issued orders for the taking of Hanoi, the last urban bastion of DRVN authority. “To seize HANOI do not hesitate to hit hard by the barrel and the bomb,” Valluy directed; “we must finish quickly by proving to our adversary the overwhelming superiority of our means.”

In its bid for mastery of Vietnam, the ICP/DRVN instigated violence and conflict against its domestic rivals. The French dramatically increased the volatility of the situation in their effort to crush Ho Chi Minh’s government and reassert their jurisdiction over the entire Indochinese peninsula. Their use of extreme forms of violence as a central and declared element of strategy served their ends well. The violence was not an “unfortunate by-product” of circumstances. It was part of a purposely designed policy to make the civilian population bleed. French weapons and methods made civilian casualties unavoidable. French military strategy was predicated on hurting civilians to demonstrate strength and resolve while deterring resistance. This use of exemplary force was clearly instigated by French military leaders.

The British Stay in Indonesia

Events in Indonesia, after the early weeks of the revolution, took a very different course from those we have just seen in Vietnam, where British and Chinese Nationalist forces had withdrawn by March 1946. British authorities on Java initially hoped to stay aloof from any conflict, but over the months of September and October 1945 they were gradually drawn into the escalating violence by pemuda militias and gangs of Eurasians and returning colonial troops. Violence further increased from November 1945 until March 1946, when British-Indian troops confronted pemuda militias in Jakarta, Semarang, Bandung, and Surabaya in an attempt to restore “order” and safeguard the evacuation of European civilian internees. In January 1946, British-Indian forces drove out pemuda militias from Jakarta’s various neighborhoods during a protracted campaign. In Semarang, the British arrived on 20 October in a city that was already in ruins because of heavy fighting between pemuda militias and Japanese elite troops. In reaction to the British offensive in Surabaya (see below), Indonesian fighters attacked British-Indian troops in Semarang when they started to evacuate European internees. Timely interference by Republican leaders from Jakarta facilitated the evacuation, but after a brief cease-fire, pemuda resumed their attacks. The British-Indian troops again faced fierce opposition, and their departure, immediately after the evacuation of internees, was nothing less than a narrow escape. Whereas the pemuda were driven out of Jakarta, in Semarang they reentered a devastated city.
Confrontations between the British and pemuda militias also resulted in the devastation of a large part of Bandung and nearly the whole city of Surabaya. Similar to what happened in Semarang, the arrival of British troops in Bandung during mid-October was preceded by violent confrontations between pemuda and the widespread kidnappings and killings of Eurasians. Also here, former colonial army POWs formed a battalion. They appropriated the name “Andjing NICA” (NICA Dogs) that Indonesians had despairingly given them, probably as a result of their reputation for abuse against their opponents. Operating in support of Eurasian gangs and Chinese militias that tried to protect European and Chinese neighborhoods, they also contributed to an escalation of tensions and violence. The British occupied the northern, European part of Bandung, while the southern part remained under pemuda control. On 23 March 1946 the British set an ultimatum demanding the departure of the pemuda militias within forty-eight hours. The pemuda did in fact leave, but the night before they left they set large parts of southern Bandung—including the Chinese quarter—on fire. “Bandung lautan api” (sea of fire) became an iconic moment in the history of the Indonesian Revolution, but it was actually a setback resulting in the destruction of a large part of the city.65

A similar defeat cum destruction occurred in November 1945 in Surabaya. Here, pemuda had controlled the city from early October onward, when Japanese commanders handed over most of their military equipment, including twenty thousand firearms as well as trucks, tanks, armored cars, and artillery. In mid-October, pemuda groups rounded up large numbers of mostly Eurasian civilians and killed hundreds. When a British-Indian brigade landed in Surabaya on 25 October, its four thousand troops were outnumbered by tens of thousands of heavily armed Republican forces, pemuda militias, and armed groups of the population. Unaware of the extremely threatening situation in Surabaya, British headquarters demanded the immediate surrender of all weapons. This was ignored by both Republican and pemuda leaders. Fighting started immediately when the British tried to evacuate European POWs and Eurasian women and children. Thanks to a cease-fire mediated on 29 October by President Sukarno and Vice President Hatta—who tried to prevent another blow to the Republic’s international reputation—the evacuation started. As it unfolded, British commander A. W. S. Mallaby was killed, probably by an Indonesian sniper. The evacuation continued because President Sukarno offered the British his apologies and ordered the pemuda to maintain the cease-fire.

When the evacuation was over, the British sought revenge. With the arrival of the complete 5th Indian Division, their forces in Surabaya amounted to twenty-four thousand troops, supported by tanks and airplanes. Another ultimatum was set and ignored. And so started the battle of Surabaya on 10 November, which
would last for three weeks. British determination to punish and destroy the enemy met revolutionary fury and the determination to defend Surabaya at all costs. The battle took the lives of thousands of Indonesian fighters and noncombatants, destroyed most of their military equipment, and devastated the city of Surabaya. Ninety percent of the population fled the city. The battle of Surabaya showed similarities to the French attack on Haiphong one year later. Both cities were destroyed, but the French and British had different motives and drew different conclusions. Whereas the French decided to regain colonial control and saw Haiphong as an example to be replicated, the British had their revenge and were even more eager to leave Java and Sumatra as soon as possible. The restoration of Dutch colonial authority was never a priority to them. The British were only able to leave Java in November 1946 owing to the cumbersome Dutch-Indonesian negotiations and the slow arrival of Dutch troops after they were allowed back starting in March 1946.

For the Republic, 10 November became Heroes Day, celebrating the biggest battle of the entire revolution. This celebration conceals the reality of a bitter
defeat and an irreparable strategic mistake in the loss of almost all military equipment, which the Republic would need so badly when the Dutch arrived in force on Java and Sumatra in the course of the next year and a half. To the Dutch, the battle of Surabaya gave the first indication that the Indonesian Revolution was not a plot of a small group of Japanese-indoctrinated men while the vast majority of the population was still loyal to their former colonial masters. However, still very few Dutchmen began to realize that the Indonesian Revolution might be too big to defeat.

Internecine violence among Indonesians did not cease after October 1945. Among the groups that had been closely associated with the former colonial order and had cooperated with the Japanese military regime were the indigenous administrative elites. Feelings of revenge were widespread in Java and northern Sumatra, where these elites had enriched themselves while the population had suffered from forced labor recruitment and malnutrition and starvation, as previously noted. All over Java, many administrators at the district and village levels had lost their legitimacy and became the target of so-called daulat actions. Daulat stands for “popular sovereignty,” and mendaulat was the verb that indicated that people took into their own hands the right to kick corrupt administrators out of their offices. To demonstrate their fall from power, these men were paraded around by an angry mob (dombreng). But kidnappings and killings of “corrupt” officials occurred as well. Many administrators had already left their position before the mobs reached their doorstep. Most daulat and dombreng actions occurred soon after the proclamation of independence, but they were not restricted to the period September 1945–1946. Depending on the extent to which administrators were forced to cooperate with the Dutch, violent daulat actions continued until the end of the revolution.67

In Banten, in West Java, and in Pekalongan, on the north coast of Java, short-lived leftist revolutions took place at the end of 1945. Here, leftist leaders tried to establish soviet-like people’s councils, abolished taxes, and distributed food and textiles confiscated from Japanese warehouses. However, they made the strategic mistake of excluding Muslim leaders from their movement and were soon faced with Islamic opponents and Republican security forces, which put an end to their socialist revolutions.68

Daulat actions were not restricted to Java. In Aceh and in the colonial plantation belt on the east coast of northern Sumatra, mass killings by local revolutionary militias put an end to aristocratic rule between December 1945 and March 1946. The aristocratic elites in Aceh and the northeast coast of Sumatra had played a key role in the system of indirect colonial rule and had been loyal to the Japanese military as well. Revenge was the motor of the pemuda movements.
Aceh was the first liberated region of Indonesia because the Dutch never tried to reoccupy the area.69

In the colonial plantation belt on the east coast of Sumatra, the ruling aristocratic elite had expected a return of colonial rule and their privileged position under Dutch protection. In September 1945, a small group of Dutch special forces headed by Lieutenant Raymond Westerling landed in Medan, to locate and assist Allied POWs and civilian internees and to prepare the return of colonial rule. Westerling rapidly recruited a local paramilitary police force manned by several hundred Moluccan ex-KNIL troops and started to impose Dutch authority in the midst of the emerging national revolution. Seemingly unknown to the Dutch authorities in Batavia, Westerling waged a local private war, hunting down pemuda leaders and criminal bands, all the while relying on torture and highly performative acts of intimidating violence. In early October 1945, a small contingent of British-Indian troops occupied the city of Medan. The British soon concluded that Westerling’s actions contributed to a spiral of violence. They disarmed his men but continued to rely on his services and his extensive intelligence network until Westerling was called back to Jakarta, where the Dutch asked him in July 1946 to create the notorious commando unit known as Depot Speciale Troepen (DST).70 Westerling’s actions represent another example of bottom-up escalations of violence in the early days of the Indonesian Revolution.

The East Sumatran countryside was in the hands of revolutionary militias with different ethnic origins (various Karo groups, Javanese migrant workers) and diverging ideological orientations (nationalist, communist, Muslim), and various gangs led by local warlords who exported tobacco and rubber to Singapore in exchange for weapons. Because of the collapse of state control, the early days of the revolution were extremely violent there. Revolts against aristocratic rule but also conflicts among militias and criminal gangs threatened the countryside. In March, a violent revolutionary fury put an end to aristocratic rule, killing hundreds of aristocrats in a bloody revenge for collaborating with colonial and Japanese power holders. When the fighting was over, Republican leaders from Java managed to calm down the heated atmosphere of death and destruction. By then, many people wanted the Republic to reestablish order.71

It is difficult to estimate the precise number of victims of the violence initiated by Indonesian, British, and Dutch forces between September 1945 and April/May 1946. Contrary to Bussemaker, Cribb, and Frederick, who mention a number of twenty to thirty thousand Eurasian victims, Bart Immerzeel has convincingly calculated that five to six thousand Eurasians were killed. Mary Somers-Heidhues estimated that approximately ten thousand Chinese lost their lives during the revolution.72 There are no precise figures of victims among the
local administrative aristocracies. In Java, most of the targeted administrators were didombreng (paraded around) or abandoned their posts themselves; but in northern Sumatra, a few hundred members of the aristocratic elite were killed. In confrontations with British and Japanese forces, an estimated twenty-five thousand Indonesians were killed, while more than 650 British-Indian soldiers and hundreds of Japanese lost their lives. We may conclude that in total, approximately forty thousand people died in Java and northern Sumatra at the beginning of the Indonesian Revolution.

The local revolutionary forces in Java and northern Sumatra were strong, and the violence they produced was primarily driven by revenge against representatives of the old colonial order (Eurasians and former colonial soldiers) and those who had collaborated with the Japanese (administrative aristocrats and Chinese traders). Violence was primarily destructive and often self-defeating. In stark contrast to the internecine violence perpetrated by ICP/DRVN death squads in Vietnam, Republican leaders had little to no control over these violent manifestations of pemuda revenge. The Republic did manage to organize the internment of Eurasian men and boys in order to prevent further bloodshed, and did intervene in Semarang and Surabaya to secure the evacuation of European civilian internees. However, it could not prevent the destruction of a large part of Bandung and the city of Surabaya. Republican forces put an end to small-scale socialist revolts in Java but came too late to prevent the mass killings on the east coast of Sumatra.

Dutch Decolonization: Federalism and Violence

In contrast to the French who tried to reoccupy Vietnam by force, the British forced the returning Dutch to negotiate an agreement with the Republic. This implied a de facto recognition of Republican authority over a large part of Java and Sumatra. Meanwhile, the Republic managed to establish its own army, which gradually incorporated various militias and eventually got a better grip on local administration. In Java and Sumatra, violence started to recede from society while the revolution turned into a more regular confrontation between Dutch and Republican troops. Newly emerging and competing states (Dutch, Republican, and federal), although fragile and fraught with internal frictions, managed to end the large-scale local violence that had characterized the early days of the revolution.

Inspired by the French approach in Indochina, the Dutch tried to impose a federal structure in order to contain the influence and power of the Republic. The Dutch design for federalism in Indonesia was characterized by a patronizing attitude. Because Indonesians were not yet considered to be able to run
their own country, a gradual process of decolonization was planned under strict Dutch control. Lieutenant Governor-General Hubertus van Mook (1945–1948) personified this policy. Federalism had to guarantee cultural diversity in the archipelago while also serving to isolate the Republic, to be surrounded by federal states willing to cooperate with the Dutch. “Good governance” was given as a precondition for independence—as if the Dutch were still in a position to set preconditions to independence.

The flagship of federal Indonesia was the State of Eastern Indonesia (Negara Indonesia Timur), which covered the eastern part of the archipelago, including the islands of Bali and Sulawesi. In March 1946, Bali was more or less brought under Dutch control by three KNIL-battalions made up of ex-POWs who had been released from prison camps in Siam and Burma. With often undisciplined violence, nationalist militias were attacked, and hundreds of freedom fighters killed. In November 1946 Dutch troops destroyed the main nationalist guerrilla force of about one hundred men in Bali. All were killed. The next month, Van Mook convened a constitutive conference in Bali attended by representatives of the future state of Eastern Indonesia. During the conference he dictated the structure and the political layout of the new state and tolerated no criticism. The conference was closed on 24 December after the delegates had elected a pro-Dutch president while the administration of the new state was basically in Dutch hands.

The capital of the state of Eastern Indonesia was Makassar in South Sulawesi. In September 1945, Australian troops had landed there and facilitated the restoration of Dutch rule. The Australians were accompanied by five hundred mainly Moluccan and Menadonese colonial troops. As in Java, clashes soon ensued with nationalist forces, until the militias were disarmed by the Australian military. In January 1946 the Australians were replaced by British troops, who in turn left in June. At that moment Dutch civil administration was restored but faced serious problems, as South Sulawesi was in a permanent state of turmoil. The conservative Dutch resident Carel Lion Cachet tried to co-opt the local aristocracy but failed to persuade the most prominent leaders. Meanwhile, nationalist militias gained ground and terrorized groups and officials who cooperated with the Dutch.

When Lion Cachet asked for extra military support to “pacify” the area, the Dutch military commander Lieutenant General Simon Spoor sent in the newly formed special forces unit Depot Speciale Troepen led by Westerling. This small unit of some 130 men was allowed to operate outside the regular military chain of command and practically received carte blanche to “restore order” under ill-defined emergency law. Westerling, who had been promoted to captain, arrived in early December 1946 and immediately started his cleansing operation (see also
Bennett and Romijn in this volume). Villages were surrounded, after which all males were assembled and houses searched for weapons. Based on often unreliable intelligence from local informants, “terrorists” were identified and demonstratively executed on the spot. Houses containing weapons, but also entire villages, were set on fire. The “Westerling method” was also practiced and even further perverted in the following months as subordinate special forces commanders and regular KNIL support units started to practice it in the northern part of South Sulawesi. A state of terror and fear was deliberately created for strategic ends, which increased distrust and hatred among the population.77 Both the Dutch military and the civilian leadership were quite well informed of the methods used in South Sulawesi. Lieutenant Governor-General Van Mook would even compare them to recent Japanese practices. He nevertheless stated on 4 January 1947 that the military violence was unavoidable in order to facilitate the establishment of the State of Eastern Indonesia. At the same time, prime minister of the Dutch-initiated Negara Indonesia Timur, Deang Malewa, confessed that he feared Westerling’s men more than nationalist militias.78
When nationalist militias retreated into the mountains, the Dutch authorities saw this as proof that the method worked. However, eventually Dutch civilian and military leaders in Jakarta realized that the mass killings in South Sulawesi had gotten out of control. In late February 1947, General Spoor revoked emergency law and ordered Westerling to return to Java. He and his special forces and regular colonial forces had murdered at least thirty-five hundred people between December 1946 and February 1947. In the wider period between July 1946 and July 1947, over six thousand people, but probably more, lost their lives during the struggle in South Sulawesi. Regular colonial army, police, and auxiliaries accounted for close to one thousand victims, while nationalist militias murdered sixteen hundred persons. Westerling would not be brought to justice for his role in the massacre, suggesting the method was approved by the military leadership. The “Westerling method,” although never practiced on a similar scale, would become an example for some other Dutch units elsewhere in Java and Sumatra.

Republican leaders initially had to accept the federal structure imposed by the Dutch. The agreement of November 1946 between the Dutch and the Republic created new tensions on both the Dutch and Indonesian sides between politicians who aimed for a diplomatic compromise and military hard-liners who wanted to reach their goals with military means. Dutch army commanders urged the “reestablishment of order” by force, meaning the elimination of the Republic, after which negotiations could start with “moderate” Indonesians. This never materialized. The Dutch assembled 120,000 troops by mid-1947 and launched two major offensives against the Republic in July 1947 and December 1948, framing them as “police actions,” just like the French. However, the Dutch failed to develop a successful counterinsurgency approach while being confronted with an increasingly effective Indonesian guerrilla strategy. Unlike in Indochina, where the United States stepped up support for the French, the Americans pressured the Netherlands to give up what they saw as a hopeless and—in light of mounting Cold War tension in Asia—counterproductive fight to reestablish control of the former colony. The fragility of Dutch policy became apparent when the most important federal states turned against the colonial power and sided with the Republic. Despite this shift of loyalty, soon after the formal transfer of sovereignty in December 1949, the Republican government abandoned the federal structure and installed a unitary state.

The outburst of violence in Indonesia immediately after independence resulted largely from anger and frustration among young radicals acting in defiance of the new, ostensibly sovereign state under leaders Sukarno and Hatta. By contrast, in Vietnam, the violence ensuing right after independence was essentially state sponsored, a product of Ho Chi Minh and other communist leaders’ effort to
consolidate DRVN authority by liquidating domestic opponents and detractors. British occupation forces did not end the violence in either Indonesia or Vietnam, but changed its nature. In abetting the return of and resumption of colonial control by the French, the British contributed to the onset of hostilities and the systematic victimization of noncombatants by French forces. After the signing of the February 1946 agreement with the Chinese Nationalists, the French implemented in the North the same policies and tactics, including systematic violence against civilians, that they had employed in the South. Conversely, British forces deployed on Java and Sumatra mostly kept the Dutch at bay through 1945 and much of 1946. However, unlike their compatriots in Vietnam, the British themselves unwillingly became directly implicated in the violence in Indonesia—and on a massive scale.

While some of the parallels are striking, the processes in Indonesia and Vietnam were each unique, owing to radically different styles of revolutionary governance, international contexts, and colonial potentials. The ICP’s effort to eliminate domestic rivals, ruthless as it was, exacerbated existing political cleavages in Vietnam and turned the Vietnamese revolution into a nasty civil war. Local violence in Java in 1945–1946, for its part, was primarily directed toward pillars of the old colonial regime, namely Eurasians, Ambonese, and Menadonese with ties to the colonial army, Chinese peranakan, and local administrative elites. In this context, noncombatants were deliberately attacked by revolutionary groups. This would strain relations between these groups and the Indonesian nation-state after 1950. In contrast to Vietnam, the revolution in Indonesia was, immediately after the proclamation of independence in Jakarta, driven primarily by local forces that often operated beyond the control of the Republican leadership. Vietnam and Java both experienced interventions by Allied forces, but owing to the initial absence and weakness of the Dutch—in contrast to early French reoccupation efforts—the British unexpectedly faced much more violent resistance, which made them de facto recognize the Republic and decide to leave Java as soon as possible. Extreme violence toward and by colonial associates in 1945–1946 in Indonesia was connected to the long-established characteristic of co-option in the colonial system. This may explain why bersiap violence against Dutch and pro-Dutch groups in Indonesia far exceeded Vietnamese violence against French nationals. In turn, this gave an early impetus for more spontaneous, locally driven escalations. Combined with Dutch weakness in military terms, as well as a lack of state control, this contributed to a pattern whereby—on both sides—extreme violence in this phase was driven bottom-up rather than directed top-down, as in Vietnam.

Two important sources of Dutch weakness—the lack of strategic potential of the metropole and British constraints imposed on Dutch actions—were not at
play for the French in Vietnam. The CEFEO had carte blanche to do as its leaders wished there. Assuming as they did that demonstrating strength and resolve was essential for compelling the Vietnamese to accept the resumption of colonial control, French military authorities sanctioned and even encouraged the use of extreme violence against both belligerents and non-belligerents by troops under their command. The suffering endured by Vietnamese civilians after the French returned in the fall of 1945 was also the product of military leaders’ obsession with their own and France’s prestige, on the one hand, and their reliance on exemplary force to assert it, on the other. Dutch commanders were only gradually enabled to display similar traits once they came in possession of more military means from late 1946. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these differing processes—either bottom-up or top-down—were surprisingly similar in both cases: widespread campaigns of extreme and exemplary violence.