
WINDOWS ONTO THE MICRODYNAMICS OF INSURGENT AND COUNTERINSURGENT VIOLENCE

Evidence from Late Colonial Southeast
Asia and Africa Compared

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This chapter pursues a microdynamics approach to political violence.¹ Essential to its argument are two elements, which might at first glance seem contradictory: variation and comparability. The challenge is to explain why civilian populations faced greater levels of repression and violence in some places and not others (the variation element) while at the same time tracing similar patterns in multiple colonial conflicts (the comparability element). To do so, we explore local experiences of insurgent action and consequent repression by imperial security forces. Evidence is drawn from selected territories in late colonial Southeast Asia and Africa. The final years of empire breakdown in Dutch-occupied Indonesia, French Indochina, and British Malaya are considered alongside the French-ruled African territories of Madagascar and Algeria, where clashes between insurgents and security forces produced opposite outcomes: a rapid collapse of rebellion in Madagascar and its eventual triumph in Algeria. We concentrate on rural communities subjected to organized violence as insurgencies triggered counterinsurgencies by colonial security forces and their local auxiliaries. Our concern is not so much with differences in political outcome between territories. Rather, our approach demonstrates that strategies of colonial violence against civilian populations reveal comparable microdynamic patterns across empires.

Three core themes are addressed. The first looks beyond the analytical preoccupation with asymmetries in decolonization conflicts by focusing on the local grievances that give rise to outbreaks of ostensibly anticolonial violence. Asymmetric conflict, and the question inherent to it—how the weak defeat the strong—are familiar to scholars of violent decolonization, and of counterinsurgencies

more generally.² We approach this question differently, focusing on the social pressures that lead communities to involvement in decolonization conflicts. We view strategy in a biopolitical sense, as derived from the countervailing efforts of insurgents and counterinsurgents to impose lasting control over the means of life—access to food, to shelter, and to basic welfare services—which marked the decolonization conflicts fought out in rural societies. Grievances over such fundamental issues, and the ways they changed over time, were the critical micro-dynamics at work here. We attach particular significance to the singular demographic advantage enjoyed by those opposed to European colonial control: their ability to conceal themselves within indigenous society. No matter how sophisticated the informant networks and intelligence-gathering apparatus created by colonial security forces, their starting point was that of the outsider.³ It was at this epistemological level of knowledge creation about local communities that insurgents could offset the imbalance in military capacity between their fighters and the security forces they engaged. Armed with fuller local knowledge about their opponents' actions and intentions, insurgents might evade capture, escape to sanctuary bases across frontiers, disrupt communications lines, or embark on ambushes or acts of sabotage.⁴

Our second theme considers the nature and composition of the irregular units, often locally recruited paramilitary formations, which we categorize as “violence workers.”⁵ These groups, often rudimentarily armed, enacted a high proportion of village-level violence, typically at the behest of others but also to improve their security or otherwise advance their interests. Their histories remind us that categories typically regarded as fixed, whether those of insurgent versus loyalist or combatant versus noncombatant, were sometimes more fluid in practice. What interests us are those local pressures that lead people to traverse the line between participation and nonparticipation in acts of political violence. Rarely was there a linear progression toward involvement in an anticolonial struggle or, conversely, toward definitive loyalty to the incumbent regime.⁶ Our proposition is that binary constructions of insurgent or loyalist are overly rigid.

Closely connected to this issue of “who fights?” our third and final theme is the targeting of local populations, colonial subjects whose precarious—and often unrecognized—status as “civilians” left the individuals and communities involved acutely exposed to insurgent and security force violence. Such targeting might be evidenced by demonstrative insurgent punishment of local authority figures and others accused of collusion with colonial state agencies or settler enterprises. But others without clear attachment to any political side also faced heightened risks as rebellions escalated and legal clampdowns ensued. Colonial populations without legally defensible rights as citizens found themselves criminalized for performing workaday activities such as moving outside their village to a place of

work, traveling after dark, or socializing in groups.⁷ Greater legal restrictions on freedom of movement—the *Staat van Oorlog en Beleg* in Indonesia, emergency restrictions in Malaya, *états d'urgence* in Algeria—which some have characterized as “lawfare,” undermined any notional idea that noncombatants were easily distinguishable from the combatants caught up in a decolonization conflict.⁸ Our interest here is in the inverse relationship between the multiplication of laws and regulations and the heightened exposure to violence that rural populations faced. For such people, law rarely protected. It persecuted.

Our objective, overall, is to tease out local experiences that either do or do not enable us to identify violent decolonization as a discrete form of conflict. In doing so, our perspective is strongly influenced by analytical shifts in the study of civil wars, in which the work of Stathis Kalyvas stands out.⁹ Kalyvas has transformed our understanding of social conditions in civil war by focusing on the motivations of those caught up in it. His recognition that conflict narratives are as multivalent as are the individual and community experiences that inform them rests on several key insights. One is that the explanations of—and justifications for—conflict participation at the macro-level of the nation, the regime, or the insurgent group may jar with those at the microlevel of the village or the extended kin network. At the local level, the microdynamics of participation in violence appear to be shaped by the perception of insecurity, itself conditioned by the continuity or otherwise in administrative services and judicial authority and the attendant presence or absence of security forces and their insurgent opponents.

The mounting difficulties of tax collection in rural Algeria during 1955, the first full year of the country's war of independence, illustrate the point. French tax assessors and the Algerian village elders required to provide information about households, livestock, and landholdings were targeted by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and, at the same time, vilified by angry residents confronted with both governmental fiscal demands and the exactions of FLN fund-raisers.¹⁰ Already issued with sidearms, tax assessors complained that they faced assassination as soon as army units moved on from the districts or settlements in question. Obedient householders who paid colonial taxes were similarly threatened.¹¹ By October of that year tax collectors struck off certain communes in eastern Constantine, an FLN stronghold, as a no-go zone.¹² The point of this example is to indicate that macro-level explanations of conflict may not coincide with the microlevel dynamics that generate violence.¹³ This is not to suggest that we ignore the national perspective to focus wholly on the local. Quite the reverse: it is to argue that our understanding of the spread of late colonial conflicts and the different ways in which they were experienced between regions and communities must accommodate these microdynamic variations alongside the major shifts in policy and action among combatant groups.

From these preoccupations, first with the contest between insurgents and security forces to impose biopolitical control over rural communities, second with those engaged in acts of violence, and finally with the erosion of noncombatant status, we derive the concept of interior borderlands. These were the places where the efforts of security forces and insurgents to compel compliance and achieve meaningful social control were most contested. Contestation over access to resident populations and their resources and the consequent absence or impermanence of tangible administration made such areas politically liminal. Hence, our descriptor of “interior borderlands,” because such places marked the edges, the outer margins of colonial authority. Thinking about these areas as interior borderlands helps us explain local variations in levels of violence against resident populations living in places where colonial state authority and insurgent control were constantly disputed.

Consider for a moment the Aurès-Nememchas (hereafter Aurès), rugged hill country in eastern Algeria. Rivalries between insurgent commanders in this region were acute, but the region remained a hub of FLN resistance from the start of the Algerian war in the winter of 1954–1955.¹⁴ Germaine Tillion, the influential ethnographer brought in by colonial governor Jacques Soustelle to help diagnose the source of Algerian resentments in this region, concluded that the Aurès was so under-administered that rural populations had no sense of a governing French presence. At the village level, the political authority of *caïds* (headmen) and *djemâas* (councils) was more tangible, but neither was integrated within a larger colonial administration.¹⁵ Often left unprotected, these village representatives were the first to face punishment by FLN fighters if they refused to work with the insurgents.¹⁶ To remedy things, in June 1955 the French government released 155 million francs to the Algiers authorities to fund the purchase of two-way radios for all subprefectures and some two hundred village councils in areas where FLN activities were reported. For the first time, the central colonial administration could communicate in real time with its local auxiliaries.¹⁷

Physically isolated from Algeria’s external frontier with Tunisia to the east, contested villages in regions like the Aurès were borderlands even so. For these were liminal spaces in which state power frayed at its edges.¹⁸ Whether deep inside Madagascar’s eastern highlands or at the perimeter of the Malayan new village, the competing efforts of state and anti-state forces to change patterns of landholding, to regulate family life, to transform cultural behavior, or, more basically, to render colonial subjects legible to officials or recruiters, were fought with particular intensity. In such interior borderlands, whether isolated villages or relocation centers, colonial subjects were especially vulnerable to the everyday violence practiced by paramilitary guards, policemen and soldiers, or, outside the confines of the settlement, by insurgents and their supporters. Rarely did these

violence workers face judicial consequences for harming colonial subjects physically, sexually, or psychologically. From punitive acts of terror to rape and other abuses against civilians, the connection between the microdynamics of violence and the nature of these interior borderlands is, we will suggest, a strong one.¹⁹

Asymmetries, Local Grievances, and Violence

Postwar uprisings in French Madagascar and British Malaya provide our case studies in this first section, with a focus on connections between community grievances, outbreaks of violence, and asymmetric repression.

We might view the outbreak of rebellion in French Madagascar in the spring of 1947 as two histories, macro and micro, running in parallel. One is the better-known account of a nationalist uprising coordinated by a political movement, the Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache (MDRM). In this master narrative, political marginalization of the ethnic groups that formed the backbone of MDRM support, inflated expectations of reform, and a police clampdown on the MDRM leadership all contributed to the outbreak of a clearly anticolonial insurgency.²⁰

The other, locally focused history is subtler. It paints a variegated landscape of overlapping village-level concerns. In this reading, struggling families take precedence over the MDRM's ideological claims. Sharp postwar increases in the price of foodstuff staples, including rice, coffee, and flour, caused widespread hardship—in some regions, even hunger. Provincial administration was meanwhile restructured during late 1945 and 1946, with budgetary responsibility devolved to provincial governors. Central to this program was the establishment of sixteen regional tax offices. Their revenue inspectors turned to the local gendarmerie, the *Garde indigène*, to enforce higher poll tax payments.²¹ Resultant village-level grievances about unaffordable food and an insupportable tax burden were sharpened by the fact that the colonial government had no functioning native affairs service. In other colonies it fell to the native affairs office—the bridge between district administrators, or *commandants de cercle*, and the colonial governor's office—to evaluate local opinion and to relay policy proposals from administrators in the field. The *commandants de cercle* could also be petitioned in person by village, clan, workplace, or other community representatives. In postwar Madagascar no such connection existed. This peculiarly colonial problem was compounded by the suppression of chiefly authorities in areas where cash crop production on settler-owned farms predominated.²²

These problems came together in the areas of Eastern Madagascar worst affected by the 1947 rebellion. The new tax offices were targeted. Most were

forced to close. Beyond the towns, armed rebels and day laborers joined in acts of political violence: burning settler-owned coffee plantations and ambushing vehicles traveling between farmsteads. Classic acts of peasant resistance—crop destruction and attacks on farm trucks loaded with produce—underscored two things: the local grievances at the heart of the rebellion and the attackers' lack of weapons with which to "take on" colonial security forces. Peasant violence served clear politico-economic purposes but was also performative: a culturally resonant act that signified a community's limits of tolerance.

The tragedy was that the principal audience—the French administration—was missing. The absence of a functioning native affairs service left the colonial government starved of information and thus prone to dangerous exaggeration about the scale of the uprising and its underlying causes. Only later did it emerge that in the rebellion's opening months between April and August 1947 all commercial traffic in three heavily settled districts on Madagascar's East Coast had ceased because of the breadth of social unrest. Unable or unwilling to identify peasant support for the rebellion as a form of protest against chronic poverty, the colonial authorities instead chose a blunt military response. Madagascar's eastern coastal belt was saturated with army reinforcements, some of them Foreign Legion and other assault troops en route to fight in Vietnam, diverted instead to the island.²³ They were expected to act fast in order to resume their original itinerary. If the rebellion's economic and cultural dynamics were never wholly understood, they were acknowledged, albeit indirectly, in terms of political ecology: of control over natural resources and their disposition.²⁴ The "restoration of order" was to be measured in the resumption of movements of people and goods from farms to markets, something that for several months required military escort.²⁵

If the violence of the Madagascar rebellion was clearly asymmetric, the Madagascar case is also instructive as an example of an ostensibly "postwar" insurgency, but one that was catalyzed by wartime political crisis and economic destabilization.²⁶ Violence was triggered as much by wartime disruption as by anticolonial sentiment, meaning that it makes sense to analyze it within the broader framework of a "greater" Second World War whose ripple effects pervaded the global South for years after 1945. There is nothing particularly original in this insight.²⁷ Decisive wartime changes, whether events or processes, are commonly applied to explain the widespread emergence of anticolonial insurgencies in the late 1940s. But, perhaps most important from our perspective as analysts of violent political processes, discussion of decolonization's violence as a social practice is substantially absent. Yet understanding collective violence as what political scientist Adria Lawrence terms a discrete *form* of conflict rather than just its *escalation* is surely crucial if we want to explore the proliferation

of insurgencies and the nature of the counterinsurgencies adopted in response to them in the aftermath of bigger wars between states.²⁸ Standing back to view Madagascar's 1947 insurrection as an escalation or, perhaps more accurately, as an explosion of social conflicts worsened by the local impact of world war is easy enough. But it requires the microlevel analysis to work out why the forms of Malagasy violence described above predominated.

In Malaya similar "greater war" dynamics were in evidence. The combination of prolonged Japanese occupation, an abortive British Federation scheme, and Malayan Communist Party (MCP) success in building support among the colony's immigrant Chinese workforce laid the ground for the outbreak of insurgency.²⁹ On 16 June 1948 the MCP launched an uprising against the British and their local clients within the Malay and Chinese communities. Communist guerrillas of the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) murdered three planters in Perak and two Chinese laborers elsewhere. The British declared a state of emergency in response, outlawing opposition movements and conducting mass arrests.³⁰

Few ethnic Chinese supported MCP goals, and the conservative Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) became a focal point for growing communal resentment against the guilt by association confronted by the 2.3 million Chinese in Malaya.³¹ Justifiable Chinese complaints of indiscriminate repression went unheeded. Colonial administrators and the Malay elites favored by the colony's political apparatus dismissed Chinese grievances, proclaiming a Malayan Federation that cemented Malay primacy while marginalizing the colony's other minorities.³² Security forces first embarked on a brutal "counterterror" campaign before turning to a compulsory resettlement scheme, the "Briggs Plan," which forcibly relocated some five hundred thousand ethnic Chinese by December 1952.³³

Initially at least, the resettlement scheme, or villagization as it was known, deepened Chinese alienation. Entire communities were displaced without warning, their homes destroyed. Cultivable land and basic amenities often proved inadequate at new resettlement sites, condemning the expellees to "slumification." By flooding Malaya's rural interior with workers forcefully removed from elsewhere, the British created a chronic labor surplus in villagization areas. Barbed-wire perimeters, curfews, and persistent police violence became routine for the "New Villagers," whose every movement was subject to punitive surveillance.³⁴ In some cases, those resettled found themselves labeled as detainees, their ID cards marked with red ink. This rendered them unemployable, because managers refused to hire "communist suspects."³⁵ Malaya's forcible resettlement was "counterinsurgency inside the wire" at its rawest.³⁶

Life in the New Villages began to improve during 1951. With resettlement nearing completion, additional funds were allocated to improving the sites.³⁷

British counterinsurgency tactics also evolved as isolated MNLA cadres faced worsening attrition. The MCP's reaction, codified in its "October 1951 Directives," was to retrench. A quarter of its frontline units were reassigned from fighting to agricultural work intended to sustain the guerrillas over the longer term.³⁸ The Malayan Chinese Association exploited these more favorable conditions to validate its self-appointed role as protector of Malaya's ethnic Chinese population. With British endorsement, MCA funds brought improved sanitation, civic amenities, and educational facilities to the New Villages.³⁹ Little by little, MCP insistence that New Villages were "concentration camps" lost credibility.⁴⁰ Communist reportage from localities such as Kedah lamented a loss of contact with village populations too closely monitored to lend any support to the insurgency.⁴¹ These changes did not signify that the British had addressed local grievances or that the MCP was entirely defeated. In 1954 New Villagers still faced grinding rural poverty and continuing harassment from all sides.⁴² Two years later, rubber tappers across six villages in Pahang protested stringent food control measures, apparently pushed into action by relatives supportive of the MNLA.⁴³ Home Guards who during the day toiled in British-owned fields still fell to MNLA bullets in supposedly safe resettlement villages.⁴⁴ In early 1956, Semenyih New Village became a cause célèbre after British security forces and local auxiliaries strip-searched women, making them run for their clothes.⁴⁵ A resulting public inquiry into these abuses was overshadowed by media concentration on the suspects arrested during the British raids.⁴⁶ Contrary to the top-down perspective of steadily improving security, these examples of the microdynamics of political violence indicate that, to the very end of Malaya's Emergency, the colony's interior borderlands exemplified by the New Villages remained an insurgency front line and a communal fault line.

Violence Workers and Paramilitaries

To pursue violent political solutions, insurgent groups first had to organize by placing themselves beyond the reach of the colonial state.⁴⁷ This the Malagasy fighters were never able to do. In other cases—Algeria, French Vietnam, and parts of Republican-held Indonesia—insurgent organization rested on networks of transnational connection, on cross-border evasion, on international streams of munitions, and on sanctuary bases in neighboring territories. How far, though, did these same dynamics condition the activities of local militias, "self-defense forces," and other violence actors whose contacts were more limited, whose freedom of movement was more constrained, or whose organization was more informal? These questions inform our second theme, focused on selected paramilitaries caught up in decolonization conflicts.

Through our microdynamics-of-violence lens, we can see that, locally, these violence workers behaved in ways inimical to colonial interests. In this connection, we look at two quite different militia groups in Indonesia: plantation guards (PG) and the ethnic Chinese paramilitary group, the Pao An Tui (PAT). Local enforcers' actions and the motives behind them illuminate that murky area where European domination stops and colonized cooperation starts. Dutch reliance on locally recruited forces increased dramatically as a function of the additional Indonesian territory brought under nominal colonial control following the first "police action" of July 1947. Still, Indonesian Republican forces compelled Dutch units to concentrate in key areas, so General Simon Spoor's command chose to arm auxiliary formations in Java and Sumatra to patrol plantations, gather intelligence, and, in the case of the PAT, protect Chinese communities. The twenty thousand or so plantation laborers formed into armed cadres are prime examples of violence workers. Armed by the colonial state to police interior borderlands, they retained some independence of action by either remaining neutral or compromising with insurgents. Plantation guards, who generally were reluctant to engage in violence, are at one end of the violence



FIGURE 3.1 During a large demonstration in Medan, Sumatra, in September 1947, Chinese protesters carry a banner demanding the means to protect themselves from the violence by Indonesian forces against their minority community. Their use of English shows they aim at an international audience. (Collection Netherlands Institute of Military History)

worker spectrum, while the Pao An Tui—better organized, but also more locally coercive—stand at the other end. What unites them is their ambivalence about serving as adjuncts of the colonial state.

Our suggestion is that, while plantation guards and the PAT tried to remain neutral during Indonesia's independence struggle, circumstances forced them to make choices based on self-preservation. By 1948 plantation guards increasingly bowed to Republican demands. The PAT also broke free of colonial control, but in a different way: taking local law enforcement and economic power into their own hands. Placing the different trajectories of the plantation guards and the PAT into comparative perspective, our argument is that one category of colonial violence workers may morph into another category of paramilitaries operating beyond state control.

Thus we suggest that the five thousand or so Chinese paramilitaries of the Pao An Tui might be described not just as violence workers, but as violence entrepreneurs. These were paramilitaries whose prime motivation was to protect their movement and the section of the population, whether ethnic, religious, or kin-based, they served. Violence entrepreneurs typically used their coercive power to carve out a sphere of influence, whether working for colonial authority or not. The PAT were violence entrepreneurs in the sense that they operated *apart* from both the Dutch colonial regime and the authority structures that coalesced into the Republic of Indonesia. Their *raison d'être* was distinct: the protection of a Chinese population widely accused of being compromised by a long history of association with Dutch colonial authority.⁴⁸ Another characteristic of violence entrepreneurs is that from the perspective of those who armed them—in this case, the Dutch—militia autonomy translated into an unwelcome capacity for independent action.⁴⁹ Financed by Chinese interest groups, the PAT controlled black markets in the towns they patrolled, sometimes bullying local police forces to turn a blind eye to illegal PAT activities.⁵⁰ Dutch sources allege that PAT intelligence gathering went hand in hand with kidnapping, molestation, and, in some cases, murder.⁵¹ Some PAT members also exploited their status as armed enforcers for the Dutch to settle local scores (with local Royal Netherlands Indies Army units, for example), thereby creating another dynamic of violence.

The Indonesian resistance targeted plantation guards and the Pao An Tui as collaborators. But whereas plantation guards generally sought accommodation with family or acquaintances in the resistance,⁵² the PAT was so specifically Chinese that compromise with the resistance was unavailable as an alternate survival strategy. Throughout the five years of the Dutch-Indonesian conflict, Chinese were murdered in large numbers.⁵³ Even so, the Chinese organizations that initially provided funds and recruits to the PAT scrambled to declare the force neutral shortly after the organization's founding in Medan, Sumatra.⁵⁴ In

practice, PAT autonomy resulted in units making enemies *and* working alongside both Republican and Dutch armies.⁵⁵

Indiscipline among plantation guards became endemic as the war reached its climax. By 1948 planters were complaining that their guards were disloyal, ineffectual, or uncontrollably violent. In one infamous case, a single guard leader persuaded an entire guard unit to stand aside when local resistance fighters, led by the guard leader's brother, attacked the plantation, killing the estate manager.⁵⁶ The pattern of forceful PG members determining the actions of complete guard units was repeated elsewhere.⁵⁷ In general terms, plantation guards refused to risk their lives by barring attackers from destroying factories and plantations. As Republican victory became imminent in 1949, policemen and local plantation guards either deserted or handed over weapons to the resistance in a bid to avoid (post-independence) retaliation.⁵⁸ As one planter frankly conceded, "[the guards] were Indonesians tasked to protect us from other Indonesians. What I'd call precarious safety."⁵⁹

Dutch authorities, aware their position was becoming untenable, disbanded the plantation guard and the Pao An Tui. Planters also wanted to rid themselves of unruly guard units because Tentara Nasional Indonesia units roaming the countryside were drawn to the weapons caches stored on the plantations. For its part, the incoming government of the federated Republic of United States of Indonesia (RUSI), soon to be transformed into the unitary Republic of Indonesia, was equally reluctant to leave plantation laborers with reserves of weapons. Immediately after independence, the president of the RUSI duly declared the plantation guards dissolved.⁶⁰ Disbanding the Pao An Tui was a tougher proposition. Where circumstances allowed, from the spring of 1948 onward the Dutch authorities negotiated local arrangements with Chinese communities and their PAT units. Elsewhere, PAT organizations endured, although they were increasingly marginalized as independence drew closer.⁶¹

Parallels might be drawn between the actions of the plantation guards as well as the increasing autonomy of the Pao An Tui militia on the one hand and, on the other hand, the rural counterinsurgent militias put in place by the French colonial administration from the start of the Algerian War in 1954–1955. In anticipation of the implementation of martial law in the northern regions where FLN activity was severest, on 24 January 1955 the Algiers government announced the creation of rural police militias, the Groupes Mobiles de Police Rurale (GMPR). French-officered but recruited among the communities they were to oversee, GMPR units reported to the local prefect, whose responsibility it was to assign them to particular towns and settlements.⁶² The underlying purpose here was two-fold: to free up army and gendarmerie units to chase down FLN fighters, and to provide the protection forces needed to convince village communities that

the Algerian rebellion would be contained. Additional static forces for policing rural settlements were also a prerequisite to Operation *Sauterelle*, a roundup of nationalist sympathizers accused of involvement in killings of local officials, settlers, and their livestock.⁶³ The original government decree creating the GMPR defined their core task in terms of restoring a “climate of confidence” in the countryside. Although some GMPR units were motorized and therefore capable of mobile operations, their judicial powers were tightly limited.⁶⁴ In theory, Algerians serving in the GMPR could only conduct house searches, make arrests, or take people into custody when gendarmes or members of the *police judiciaire* were present.⁶⁵ In practice, their agency was greater. GMPR members furnished vital intelligence about which houses to search and which suspects to detain, creating ample opportunity to shape police operations and to safeguard their interests.⁶⁶

As with the plantation guards, doubts persisted within the colonial administration over the loyalties of individual units of the GMPR. General Gaston Parlange, a former native affairs officer who directed army operations against the FLN in the Aurès during 1955, judged the new militia critical to French counterinsurgency. Together with Governor Jacques Soustelle, he lobbied hard for GMPR units to receive modern equipment, including heavy machine guns, mortars, and jeeps. Both men insisted that GMPR personnel be paid on time, highlighting official anxieties about their loyalty.⁶⁷ Revealingly, Parlange admitted that the rural population of eastern Constantine, the larger region in which the Aurès was situated, was “completely silent” about the estimated four hundred FLN fighters in their midst.⁶⁸ The general identified various microlevel factors to explain the local population’s refusal to cooperate with the French authorities: chronic rural poverty, lack of basic administrative services, and sentimental attachment to anti-authority figures. Six months later, one of Parlange’s colleagues, Colonel Constans, a senior commander in eastern Constantine, turned this logic of microdynamic pressures on its head, insisting that the FLN, and not the colonial system, was the root of the problem. He advised the Algiers authorities of the opportunities presented by the unremitting cycle of insurgent demands on villagers in his sector of operations: “Different sources confirm that the populations of the *douars* are tired of the exactions of *fellaghas* [slang form, for “peasant rebels”] and are seeking our protection. [FLN-]forced exactions, demands for supplies, summary executions, punishments, etc. ruin peasant livelihoods and create a climate of fear. Every Muslim can be denounced as a government informer by an enemy and executed without any form of trial.”⁶⁹ For all that, Parlange’s primary solution was punitive: levying collective fines and coercing villagers into working with the GMPR.⁷⁰

It was a hopeless task. Between 1955 and 1957 the quickening rhythm of attacks by the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) on villages and farmsteads supposedly under GMPR protection raised new questions about GMPR effectiveness.⁷¹ ALN incursions were often timed to coincide with the absence of French officers or in the knowledge of where GMPR personnel would be at a particular time. ALN insurgents sometimes escaped after having seized the entire cache of GMPR small arms: the principal prize involved. The combat performance of particular GMPR units in several such encounters was judged so poor that more reliable formations, with a higher proportion of French personnel, were brought in to replace them.⁷² GMPR units complained in turn that army sector commands either failed to provide force protection when insurgent attacks were threatened or, worse, fired on GMPR personnel mistaken for insurgents. Rural communities were left unconvinced that their security situation was improving.⁷³

The war's local vicissitudes and mounting tensions in the GMPR-army relationship became grimly apparent on the night of 20–21 April 1956. ALN fighters launched coordinated attacks on five villages in the eastern Algerian *communes mixtes* of Guergour and Lafayette, situated northwest of Sétif. All five villages had allegedly either come over to the French or sought army protection. A diversionary attack was launched against the GMPR post situated between them, leaving the surrounding population unprotected throughout the night. In the village of Ticsi, twenty inhabitants had their throats cut, and the homes of those accused of collaboration with the French authorities were burned. Two other villages in the same *douar* were destroyed by arson, their occupants having fled as news reached them of attacks nearby. Twenty-eight corpses were found in two villages in the neighboring *douar* of Ikadjadjen. Unconfirmed reports of civilian deaths in other settlements were lent credibility by the discovery of a further twenty-five bodies in the Beni Chebana *douar*, making this the largest ALN reprisal raid in the Constantine *département* since the massacres ordered in the Philippeville region by local FLN commander Youcef Zighoud on 20 August 1955. Significantly, even after these attacks were reported and reinforcements requested, the French sector command lacked sufficient forces to station any troops in the affected villages.⁷⁴

The loss of trust between army commanders, the prefectural authorities, and GMPR units under their authority deepened as factionalism and competition intensified among the insurgents fighting the French.⁷⁵ The infamous defection of self-styled general Mohammed Bellounis, commander of the Armée Nationale du Peuple Algérien, the largest insurgent force loyal to Messali Hadj's Mouvement National Algérien, antagonized numerous GMPR cadres.⁷⁶ Bellounis reportedly came over to the French in disgust at the FLN's killing of scores of his fellow Kabyles in a July 1957 massacre near the settlement of Melouza, always a

contested interior borderland of the Algerian conflict. Local GMPR units were sidelined as a result, a poor reward, some said, for their longer-term loyalty to the colonial authorities next to Bellounis's more recent change of heart. Anger within the GMPR boiled over after another high-level 1957 defection, that of Larbi Cherif, a prominent ALN commander in southern Algeria. Cherif, who spent over a decade in the French army before joining the FLN, was derided as an opportunist, a regional strongman whose harsh exactions from the local Muslim population continued regardless of his change of sides.⁷⁷

Whether Cherif was simply better at extracting local advantages than GMPR units, whose opportunities for gain were constrained by their working partnerships with French security forces, is open to question. Whatever the case, during 1958 the nature and composition of this rural police militia changed fundamentally. An FLN propaganda campaign was by then under way, seeking to persuade young Algerians to join either the GMPR or its civil administrative partners in the Sections Administratives Spécialisés (SAS). This paradox was easily explained. Once assigned to the GMPR or the SAS, these new recruits were expected to relay intelligence, to purloin supplies, and, most importantly, to steal weapons for use by the ALN.⁷⁸ Little wonder that the GMPR was excluded from French strategic planning as preparations began for General Maurice Challe's major offensive against the ALN insurgency conducted in 1959.

The GMPR's brief history, as these examples suggest, was shaped by the interaction between major shifts in the conduct of the Algerian war and the micro-dynamics of village politics and community interest. Drawn into the war as the conflict escalated in 1955–1956, the GMPR was, by late 1958, marginalized from French counterinsurgency plans.⁷⁹ The effectiveness of this rural militia was called into question as it became harder for serving GMPR personnel to navigate a path between protection of their local communities, outward loyalty to colonial authority, and, in some cases, a willingness to accommodate FLN/ALN demands. Ultimately, these local factors proved determinant. Although never wholly co-opted by the FLN, the GMPR was not the colonial security instrument that its French architects had hoped.

Problems of Civilian Status and Targeting

Issues that have surfaced repeatedly in this chapter—the ability or inability of colonial security forces to protect isolated settlements, the composition of the units assigned the task, and the shrinking space for neutralism as insurgencies intensified—crystallized in the ways in which civilian populations were targeted by competing combatants.⁸⁰ This, perhaps the most important of the

microdynamics in decolonization conflicts, also presented the most visceral dilemma for those living in the interior borderlands we have studied thus far.

To illustrate the point, we again focus at the microlevel on local communities, this time in Indonesia, French Vietnam, and Algeria. Their responses to the violent decolonization unfolding around them mirrored the vulnerabilities of living along interior borderlands. Our first example is the Sundanese, an ethnic group consisting of between eight to ten million Indonesians concentrated in West Java. On 4 May 1947 in Bandung's central square, the Partai Rakyat Pasundan (PRP), led by Suriakartalegawa, proclaimed the autonomous State of Pasundan, or Negara Pasundan. The culmination of sustained Sundanese pressure, the establishment of the Pasundan State in West Java was cemented by the Malino Conference of July 1946, during which Lieutenant Governor-General Hubertus van Mook urged distinct polities to seek autonomy under the Federated Indonesian States.⁸¹

The PRP's victory was hotly contested. Dutch authorities accused Suriakartalegawa of corruption, and infighting made day-to-day governance difficult.⁸² Worse still, the Pasundan's creation outraged the Republic of Indonesia. Under the March 1947 Linggajati Agreement, the Dutch ceded de facto sovereignty over Java and Sumatra to the Republic. The latter saw an autonomous state in West Java as yet another Dutch betrayal.⁸³ Prospects for the Pasundan were further diminished by divisions among the Sundanese. Some reported to Dutch strongholds to signify their support. Others, not wanting the ascription of Sundanese identity abruptly foisted upon them, accused Suriakartalegawa of fomenting discord among Indonesians.⁸⁴

In the short term, proclamation of the Pasundan State helped both the Dutch and those sympathetic to the Republic solve a problem that had plagued them since 1945: distinguishing friend from foe. Each wanted to deny civilian populations the option of neutralism by compelling adherence to its respective side. For the Dutch, the Pasundan State functioned as a lever to draw in those Sundanese who sought protection from Republican demands. Conversely, for Sukarno's Republic the sudden visibility of supporters of the Negara Pasundan afforded its troops civilian targets who were now condemned as collaborators.⁸⁵ This tension between Sundanese and Indonesian (Javanese) identities produced specific forms of violence. Its distinguishing feature was the ascription of collective guilt to the Sundanese community, and most especially to those living along the expanding interior borderland of the frontiers between West and Central Java.

Both inside West Java and beyond it, anti-Pasundan organizations sprang up. Sundanese village leaders were cajoled into signing standardized forms that signed over entire villages to the Republic at the stroke of a pen. The Indonesian National Army (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) units forced villagers into public acts of repudiation, mocking portraits of Suriakartalegawa. Soon, Pasundan's

information service had collated long lists of retaliatory acts, including arson and murder, against Sundanese who refused to comply with Republican demands. All took place as the direct result of this new polity, the Pasundan, and the interior borderland it created at the edge of Republican territory in Java.⁸⁶

In sum, proclamation of the Negara Pasundan made waging war against the Dutch in West Java synonymous with ethnic violence against the Sundanese. In Republican eyes, the Pasundan had to be destroyed. The Dutch, meanwhile, used the creation of this autonomous state to force increasing numbers of Sundanese to take their side. At the macro-level, too, the Pasundan's leaders oscillated between Republican and Dutch forces, mirroring the divisions experienced among village communities.⁸⁷ But it was at the microlevel that the TNI won the battle for West Java over the course of 1949.

Recalling our discussion of the Pao An Tui, one might ask whether there was much difference between Republican targeting of the Sundanese and the ethnic Chinese. In both cases the combination of lasting intercommunal frictions and locally specific microdynamics was crucial. Whereas ethnic Chinese had for a long period been cast as unreliable outsiders unsympathetic to the Indonesian national ideal, for the Sundanese such accusations were a direct outcome of the ways violent decolonization played out. They were placed outside the Indonesian Republican nation because of their presumed ideological choice to oppose it.



FIGURE 3.2 In Padang, West Sumatra, an Indonesian villager is forced to tell those who have fled that it is safe to return to their homes and to not fear the Dutch presence. 1947. (Collection Netherlands Institute of Military History)

Phrased differently, by 1947 the required level of performance of loyalty to either the Republic or the Dutch increased, as did the penalties for making the wrong choice. Neutrality became unsustainable, making “civilian status” meaningless.

Similar dynamics of shrinking civilian spaces can be observed in French Vietnam and French Algeria, one at the end of a decolonization conflict, the other at a decisive moment of escalation. On 15 May 1954 dignitaries in the North Vietnamese urban center of Phúc Yên, in the Red River delta fifty kilometers upstream from Hanoi, submitted a petition to the commander of the local French colonial garrison. Phúc Yên’s petitioners made a simple plea. They wanted an hour’s extension, from 9:30 to 10:30 p.m., before the nightly military curfew was imposed. Three days later, the French sector commander, Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Huot, responded with a polite *non*. It was precisely because of the army’s nighttime patrols that life in Phúc Yên remained so calm. Vietminh insurgents were active nearby, and experience proved that attacks were usually launched under the cover of darkness. Far better for Phúc Yên’s townsfolk to put up with continuing curfew restrictions than risk more numerous Vietminh incursions.⁸⁸ Apparently mundane, this workaday exchange between civilian petitioners and their counterinsurgent “protectors” is actually peculiar.

Why? Because ten days earlier, 435 kilometers due west of Phúc Yên’s emptied streets, the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had won a signal victory at the Dien Bien Phu fortress complex. News of Dien Bien Phu’s fall had an electrifying effect locally and globally. In a peace conference then in session at Geneva, the pace of international negotiations for a definitive French withdrawal from Vietnam quickened.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, at the heart of Huot’s patrol sector, in the towns and settlements outlying Hanoi, desertions from local “home guard”-type units surged from a trickle to a flood.⁹⁰ These colonial reverses were not unforeseen. Conscious that the prospect of victory in the war in Indochina was slipping from their grasp, in October 1953 French commanders in Saigon established a grandly named “War Committee”—in reality, less a strategic policy forum than an improvised solution typical of a bureaucracy no longer fit for the purpose.⁹¹ This macro-level initiative was, at least in part, a response to microlevel problems. The war’s enormous financial costs—more than 70 percent of which were met by the US Treasury—had stifled French schemes for inward investment or the reconstruction of local administrative services of the type commonly tied to counterinsurgency efforts. The former “Associated States” of Cambodia and Laos were by then edging toward self-government.⁹² Larger tracts of northern Vietnam were slipping into Vietminh hands, with refugees streaming southward in anticipation of a Communist victory.⁹³ Operationalizing French military plans in these circumstances was impossible politically or practically. At all levels, the Indochina War’s dynamics were clearly working against France.

Yet, at the microlevel, throughout these turbulent months the inhabitants of Phúc Yên stuck by their curfew. Or did they? Huot's sanguine remarks in May 1954, patiently advising the disappointed petitioners to be indoors by 9:30 p.m., masked the fact that the town's fringes were already infested with Vietminh fighters. Strict curfew restrictions in the town center were essential to free up troops for more intensive patrolling of Phúc Yên's unruly outer districts. In short, the town was not some aberrant oasis of calm, but a microcosm of the war. Its internecine conflicts—between affluent center and impoverished edges, between the committed and the noncommittal, between Communist and non-Communist—were starkly apparent to the French commanders on the ground.⁹⁴ As in Indonesia, taking sides could no longer be avoided.

Two years after the Indochina War's endgame, in spring 1956 French armed forces were immersed in an even bigger conflict, this time in Algeria. Again, the paradoxical combination of harsh realism and dislocated unreality is striking in the welter of day-to-day military correspondence.⁹⁵ Analysts at the army's military intelligence bureau in Paris sifted through incoming weekly reports on the incidence of ALN killings, the progress of army security sweeps, and consequent changes in local Algerian opinion. Administrative difficulties within each and every sector command were meticulously described. Summarizing the reportage received in the final week of March 1956, the bureau chief, a Colonel Dalstein, was cautiously upbeat.⁹⁶ His timing was significant. This was the first full reporting period after Guy Mollet's Socialist-led government enacted its infamous Special Powers legislation in Algeria.⁹⁷ Martial law was extended in juridical and geographical reach. And French national service personnel were for the first time assigned to begin a massive expansion of the army's presence throughout the territory.⁹⁸

These measures, a huge about-turn for a newly elected French government that had promised a negotiated end to the Algerian war, were preemptive.⁹⁹ High-grade intelligence indicated that the ALN's recent intensification of attacks prefigured a general offensive in which the insurgents would try to seize control of a major Algerian town from which to proclaim a "free Algerian government." The threat of an attempted urban occupation, the French intelligence now indicated, was overblown. There was, as yet, no genuinely nationwide rebellion, no "general terrorist uprising" in Dalstein's more loaded words. Nevertheless, the intensity of ALN violence was steadily increasing in the regions of the Algerian interior worst affected by rebel exactions. Public servants faced mounting threats. The buildings they worked in—police stations, government offices, schools, and the like—were being systematically destroyed. Weekly markets, another favored target, were forced to close, bringing rural commerce to a virtual standstill. The fabric of French administrative and economic control was being systematically torn away.¹⁰⁰

Two months later, in May 1956, with emergency restrictions and accompanying French reinforcement in full swing, Dalstein mulled over the latest incoming military intelligence with greater confidence. The arrival of French conscript reinforcements had enabled the army's frontline units to mount search-and-destroy operations against even the most intractable rebel bands. ALN losses looked unsustainable. Most importantly, Algerian inhabitants caught in the crossfire understood that the balance of the war was shifting France's way. Dalstein dwelt on encouraging indications from two regions in particular. In and around the eastern market town of Guelma, epicenter of an earlier Algerian uprising in May 1945, local people were asking French garrison units to protect their homes and farmland. Meanwhile, south of Algiers in the Soummam Valley, another region of persistent rebel activity, villagers were forming self-defense units to resist ALN incursions. Week after week, these units demonstrated their willingness to fight off ALN insurgents.¹⁰¹ Or so it seemed.

Eight weeks after Dalstein filed his report, ALN commanders and FLN party leaders would gather in that same Soummam Valley. Far from facing eviction by army pursuers or worrying about loyalist vigilantes, the rebellion's senior leadership debated the next stage of the Algerian war. The Soummam conference attendees eventually decided to sustain the rural insurgency while at the same time opening a new phase of urban guerrilla warfare and investing greater effort in the conflict's internationalization.¹⁰²

What do this final section's three cases from Indonesia, Vietnam, and Algeria tell us about the civilianization of decolonization conflicts? Certain aspects might seem familiar. Of these, perhaps three stand out. First, both Indochina and Algeria were asymmetric conflicts in which the occupier's military preponderance and other technological advantages proved insufficient to prevent defeat. In Indonesia, though, the situation was more complex, the asymmetries less obvious, and certainly not consistently working in favor of one side or the other. Second, across each of the three cases, varied methods of war fighting and population control apparently did little—or not enough—to prevent colonial administrative control from ebbing away. Neither fixed defense of key strategic redoubts (as practiced in North Vietnam) nor the military saturation of territory and aggressive mobile warfare (as practiced in Algeria) changed the course of conflicts in which the hostility of civilian populations intensified over time. French security forces tried unsuccessfully to combine what David Kilcullen, in the context of Indonesian counterinsurgency actions in 1950s East Timor, has termed “counter-force” and “counter-value” strategies.¹⁰³ The former used blunt military violence—napalm bombing and free-fire tactics—in an effort to overwhelm insurgents. The latter combined political promises with social welfare initiatives, plus an intensive concentration on the domestic economy of the household, in

an effort to weaken popular support for independence movements.¹⁰⁴ Applying both strategies, whether sequentially or in combination, proved fruitless in Algeria. For all that, specialist commanders, whether in the elite French army units integral to “counter-force” or the psychological warfare bureaus supportive of “counter-value,” rejected any change of course.¹⁰⁵

A third facet of these French conflicts, and one intimately connected to the preceding point, was the reliance on bureaucratized counterinsurgency, on data collection and statistical analysis of “kill rates” and other supposed indicators of security force advance.¹⁰⁶ This flattered to deceive. Its rationale, that human geographies could be understood and, with that, controlled, was visible in British-occupied Malaysia and Dutch-occupied Indonesia. British officials busied themselves applying statistical analyses on “Surrendered Enemy Personnel” to understand what made them tick. To the south, Dutch general Spoor kept tallies of incidents while divvying up the countryside into “*rayons*” he felt the security forces should be able to control.¹⁰⁷ By the time Spoor had conceived of this idea, the Republican grip on the countryside already precluded its implementation.¹⁰⁸

In Algeria, by mid-1956 ALN commanders were facing dreadful attrition and struggled to keep large bands of fighters in the field. The insurgency’s complexion altered in response. Greater strategic onus would be placed on bringing the war from the countryside to Algeria’s northern cities. And, post-Soummam, the FLN-ALN would refine their methods of social control, from collecting funds and recruiting informants to enforcing boycotts and punishing “traitors” to the national cause. Security force reportage offered little insight into any of this, missing the decisive shifts in local politics. Indeed, the army’s focus on wearing down the ALN masked the longer-term microdynamics of wars in which civilian populations were compelled to make life-or-death choices in conditions of heightened insecurity.

This chapter has connected local experiences of insecurity with more familiar narratives of conflict between security forces and their opponents—or macro-histories of decolonization. The argument is that the violence adopted by insurgents and counterinsurgents is contingent on the options available to them. The forms this violence took might appear excessive, insofar as exemplary, highly performative killings and lesser forms of bodily violence predominated. But the violence itself was conditioned by endogenous factors that, we suggest, are better comprehended in terms of available options. In this sense, the supposed extreme nature of violence we have considered can be understood as a series of logical, if troubling, choices. These options might be spatial, conditioned by geography, remoteness, and the logistics of communications and supply. They might be technological, a matter of available weaponry and other instruments of violence.

Most often, we suggest, they were political: a reflection of the level of restrictions imposed on freedom of movement, of association and therefore of organization. To test these propositions, we have analyzed cases relating to three topics: local grievances and degrees of asymmetry; violence workers and paramilitaries; and, lastly, problems of civilian status and targeting.

Our findings confirm that some common assumptions should be rethought. One is that colonial conflicts were highly asymmetric, the greater resources of colonial security forces compelling insurgents to focus on strategies of population control. We suggest that this is too reductive a view. For one thing, there was enormous variation in forms and levels of violence between areas that were more or less politically secure. In other words, even where incumbent forces (or their opponents) had “solved” the asymmetry puzzle and imposed seemingly uncontested control, rural communities were not safe from incursion and its violent consequences. For another, supposedly fixed categories demarcating those who supported or opposed the warring parties were in fact malleable and, for the most part, locally determined. Our first chapter section illustrated this point. It seems clear, for instance, that in 1947 the French government never grasped the political economy of the Madagascar revolt and the microdynamics of rural impoverishment that drove communities to violence. Determined to justify a repressive military response, ministers and colonial administrators, as well as army commanders in situ, instead misrepresented the revolt as an entirely macro-process, a nationalist uprising coordinated by a single political movement, the MDRM. In the geographically compact space of peninsular Malaya, by contrast, British security forces and their Malay auxiliaries gradually imposed tighter political control through the coercive containment of a rural ethnic minority population within the closely monitored confines of the “New Villages.”

In the more diffuse interior borderlands of the Algerian highlands and the Indonesian archipelago the work of counterinsurgency proved much harder. Even after several years of decolonization war in both countries, loyalties among the civilian majority were primarily conditioned by their lived experience of local violence and not by the “national” history of competing ideological visions for a colonial or post-independence future. It was in this context that our second chapter section examined distinctions between violence workers and violence entrepreneurs, disaggregating between those enacting violence and those directing it. Local enforcers’ actions shed light on those interior borderlands, places where state control was fitful and was only one of several endogenous factors shaping the actions of those caught up in decolonization violence. In this context, our examples of paramilitary units called on to do violence work—plantation guards in Indonesia and police militia in rural Algeria—might be construed as “victims” of the colonial system insofar as they were coerced into supporting it.¹⁰⁹

Depicted as “loyalist” collaborators, these violence workers were anything but. Their ambiguous position and the alliance-making strategies it demanded reveal something deeper about the interior borderlands that such groups policed.¹¹⁰ If sustaining the colonial system was dependent on the very communities it sought to restructure and control, then the proposition that decolonization conflicts were, at least in part, civil wars seems especially persuasive.¹¹¹ Viewed from above, the use of local proxies is a persistent, even defining feature of counterinsurgency strategy. Viewed from below, it looks much different: in part, the displacement of violence work onto local community members; in part, a means for those same community members to enhance their access to material resources, to social capital, and to biopolitical power.¹¹²

Violence work, then, presented agonizing life-and-death choices. Significantly, despite the efforts made in Indonesia and Algeria to professionalize the plantation guards and the GMPR respectively, neither militia proved either willing or capable of protecting its interior borderlands against insurgent forces. Members of the Pao An Tui, by contrast, were active community protectors with greater autonomy to exploit their role as an autonomous militia. Their willingness to do so lent the entrepreneurial dimension to their violence work, but also precluded compromise with encroaching Republican forces.

The issue of civilian exposure to violence discussed in our final chapter section made clear that insecurity persisted, despite the security force preoccupation with securitization, with martial law, curfews, punitive restrictions, and other facets of so-called “lawfare.” Community members still faced the threat or actuality of violence, whether for defying restrictions or, alternatively, for obeying them.¹¹³ Many adapted as best they could, performing multiple identities in an effort to achieve greater security. Public behavior and even intimate private lives mirrored these shifts. Sometimes that required outward compliance with authority, at others, a readiness to support anticolonial movements, or, depending on circumstances, both. These variations, particularly in the interior borderlands on which we have concentrated, underline the importance of a microdynamics approach if one is to grasp who used violence, who suffered it, and why. Contested decolonization, as a consequence, was experienced as something closer to civil war for many of the rural and urban communities among which it was fought.