Empire's Violent End

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Published by Cornell University Press

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“THE NORMAL ORDER OF THINGS”

Contextualizing “Technical Violence” in the Netherlands-Indonesia War

Azarja Harmanny and Brian McAllister Linn

In 1963, two years before the United States committed its armed forces to large-scale “search and destroy” operations in Vietnam, one journalist recalled Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann explaining “the essentials of guerrilla war.” Among the most important of Vann’s principles was to recognize “this is a political war and it calls for discrimination in killing. The best weapon would be a knife. . . . The worst is an airplane. The next is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle—you know who you are killing.”1 Vann’s views on guerrilla warfare and his dismissal of conventional military methods are echoed in the memoirs of the controversial Dutch special forces captain Raymond “Turk” Westerling a decade earlier. In a stinging retort to those outraged by his summary execution of four prisoners during the Indonesian struggle for independence, Westerling claimed that had he followed “the normal order of things” of European “professional military men,” he would have pulverized the village with artillery or aerial bombardment.2 He insisted that his own counterinsurgency tactics, which emphasized the face-to-face killing of those he deemed guilty, were both more effective and more moral. During a campaign of less than three months on South Sulawesi, the so-called Westerling method resulted in the execution of many hundreds of noncombatants. The Vann-Westerling critique of the misapplication of Western technology in unconventional conflicts has long been a truism among counterinsurgency theorists. Like the two veterans, they maintain that “heavy” weapons such as artillery and aviation that employ “indirect fire” in which the “shooter” does not see the target not only are ineffective against mobile, dispersed guerrilla
bands, but also inflict disproportionate destruction and death on the civilian population that the government is legally and morally obligated to protect. In Dutch historiography of the Netherlands-Indonesia War of 1945–1949, this issue has centered on the term *technisch geweld* (technical violence). Coined by Van Doorn and Hendrix in their 1970 study on a general “derailment of violence,” *technisch geweld* was loosely defined but mainly referenced the use of indirect-fire weapons such as artillery and aviation. Later authors have suggested a strong link between *technisch geweld* and excessive violence, arguing that almost by definition it victimized noncombatants. Many have suggested that *technisch geweld*, especially artillery bombardment, caused the majority of Indonesian civilian casualties. Yet as historian Bart Luttikhuis recently noted, those scholars who write on *technisch geweld* have so far failed to provide either a clear definition of the term or an analytical framework to distinguish between extreme/excessive and normal/legitimate violence. This distinction often proves to be more complex for the use of indirect-fire weapons than for direct forms of violence such as execution, torture, and rape. Moreover, they have provided little empirical substantiation of their claims.

This chapter seeks to provide a preliminary response to the challenge by Rémy Limpach, reiterated by Luttikhuis, that a study of *technisch geweld* in the Indonesian archipelago is long overdue. We apply this term in a comparative and contemporary context, including not only concurrent decolonization struggles such as Indochina (1945–1953) and Malaya (1948–1950), but such contemporary irregular conflicts as Korea (1945–1953), the Greek Civil War (1947–1949), and the Hukbalahap Rebellion (1946–1954). By not treating the Indonesian case in isolation, we achieve a more nuanced understanding of its relative scale and—even more difficult to establish—its impact on those at the receiving end of violence. Including these conflicts not only avoids restrictions imposed by “decolonization” but corroborates the “greater” Second World War interpretive framework outlined by Roel Frakking and Martin Thomas in this volume.

As a first step to what we anticipate will be an extended and informed scholarly debate, we ask three questions. First, we examine whether the Netherlands armed forces’ use of indirect-fire heavy weapons between 1945 and 1949 was exceptional when seen in the context of historical developments and compared to other contemporaneous conflicts. Second, we address the question of the effectiveness of the use of these weapons in irregular wars like the Netherlands-Indonesia War. Third, we will discuss the use of heavy weapons in Indonesia and critically assess the frequently repeated assumption that heavy weapons rather than “direct” forms of violence caused the bulk of military and civilian casualties in that conflict.
“Heavy Indirect Weapons” in a Historical Perspective

The historiography of the Netherlands-Indonesia War has tended toward studying Dutch military practices in isolation, and nowhere is this more apparent than the treatment of indirect weapons. But the Dutch forces were the inheritors of a firepower revolution that occurred between 1860 and 1945 and that witnessed massive changes in weapons technology, doctrine, and military organization.8 In barely eight decades ordnance evolved from the smoothbore cannon to the atomic bomb. The increased range, accuracy, and lethality of infantry rifles drove artillery from the front lines and into concealed or protected firing positions. Near simultaneous developments in steel construction, recoil systems, explosives, and optics greatly increased artillery’s range and destructive effect. Over time, armies developed sophisticated methods of “indirect fire” based on forward observers and directed by a centralized control system to identify and destroy targets far beyond human sight. Artillery was divided between guns fired directly at enemy positions and howitzers and mortars, which fired at an angle, their shells arcing over obstructions before exploding. A further division was between fortress artillery—some of forty-centimeter caliber firing a one-ton shell fifty kilometers—and mobile, light, or medium-caliber field artillery that accompanied armies on campaign. The destructive power of the latter was manifest in the Franco-Prussian War, when in a few hours the massed fire of some 540 field guns shattered French infantry, killing ten thousand and wounding twice that many. Ominously, the Germans later turned their artillery on Paris, a late addition to other efforts to end irregular resistance through food denial, property destruction, and extrajudicial killings.9

The cumulative effects of the firepower revolution were apparent in the First World War, when artillery repeatedly slaughtered attacking infantry and imposed the stasis of trench warfare. It became a military commonplace that artillery conquered and infantry occupied. For their March 1918 offensive the Germans concentrated some 6,500 artillery pieces and 3,500 trench mortars to overwhelm 2,686 British artillery.10 Firepower escalated not only upward to include larger and larger caliber guns, a multitude of shells (including gas), and tanks, but also downward as riflemen went into battle carrying mortars, machine guns, grenades, and flamethrowers. For frontline soldiers, distinctions between direct and indirect fire were often meaningless: they shot blindly to suppress enemy fire more than at individuals. To concentrate and control such copious firepower required the construction of a vast logistical infrastructure, hundreds of staff officers, a sophisticated observation and reporting system, and fire plans that extended into the thousands of pages. Aviation became an essential asset for
artillery, first to identify enemy batteries and observe their own artillery’s fire, then to drive away the enemy’s observation aircraft, and finally as flying artillery to strafe and bomb.

The Second World War continued the trend toward greater and greater application of firepower, and further blurred differences between direct and indirect heavy weapons as well as the distinction between combatants and noncombatants. The fascist powers may have initiated “total war”—and gloried applying it on civilians from Warsaw to Nanking. And in many instances the worst incidents of extreme violence—the German soldiers who murdered Jews, prisoners, and civilians, and the wholesale Japanese butchery of Chinese and Filipinos—were conducted with supposedly more discriminate pistols, rifles, bayonets, and even swords. But the extent of the Axis military triumphs ultimately forced their opponents to embrace total war, and ultimately to practice it with far more devastating results. Even more than in the First World War, to produce, distribute, and apply such firepower required the mobilization of the personal, economic, and social resources of the nation-state, blurring any lines between civilians and military. During the Normandy campaign of June and July 1944, Allied bombers dropped over fifty thousand tons of ordnance, destroying much of France’s transportation system and killing thousands of civilians. Even in more isolated areas in the Second World War, firepower reigned: a British commander in Burma grimly noted that a recent artillery barrage had reduced one ridgeline’s height by one thousand feet and added “two feet of dead Japs.” Although comparisons are both misleading and insensitive, it is evident that during the war there were many instances when the expenditure of ammunition in a single day exceeded the sum total of the Dutch armed forces in four years of fighting in Indonesia.

The increase in weapons’ range and lethality revolutionized how Western armies conducted warfare in several ways. In what Stephen Biddle termed the “modern system,” soldiers were organized into integrated “combined arms” forces that augmented strengths and shielded weaknesses. Modern armies could no more disaggregate their component parts than a professional football team would play only goalkeepers. To post–Second World War professional officers, Vann’s call to throw aside modern weapons and return to knives would have been worse than impractical romanticism—it would have required the unnecessary sacrifice of their soldiers’ lives.

This firepower revolution and the modern system also impacted colonial warfare. From a 1940s perspective, firepower in the Netherlands-Indonesia War was limited both technically—since most of the airplanes, artillery, and tanks used by the Dutch were classified as “medium” or even “light”—and in quantity. This was in keeping with prior experience with colonial warfare, when the use of both artillery and aviation was often limited by terrain, cost, objective, and the nature
CHAPTER 6

of the enemy. Artillery was most effective when indigenous opponents either sought battle against large colonial forces or allowed themselves to be besieged. But almost as important as its destructiveness was what colonial theorist Charles Callwell termed the cannons’ “terrifying moral effect” on enemy warriors and populations.\textsuperscript{14} Aviation had similar effects on matériel and morale. In 1911, less than a decade after the first powered flight, aircraft were incorporated into colonial warfare when an Italian pilot dropped grenades on Arab tribesmen at a Libyan oasis. After the First World War the British relied on “aerial policing” to pacify the empire from Afghanistan to Somalia. With conscious irony, British poet Hilaire Belloc summarized the importance of modern weaponry in the acquisition of empire with the couplet, “Whatever happens, we have got / The Maxim Gun, and they have not.”\textsuperscript{15}

Those military theorists who fought against imperial domination also accepted the firepower revolution and the modern system. Indeed, much of their focus was on how to obviate both, at least until their own sides were ready to apply them. The analogy ascribed to Mao Tse-tung of the populace being the “sea” through which the guerrilla “fish” swam illustrates a ruthless acceptance that civilians must not only support the insurgency politically but shield its agents even at the cost of government retaliation. There were no neutrals; the populace had to be fully committed in what Indonesian theorist Abdul Haris Nasution termed “total people’s war.”\textsuperscript{16} But for both Mao and Nasution the ultimate objective was to create professional, conventional armies. Indeed, revolutionary forces soon proved every bit as willing to use indirect-fire weapons—at times more effectively than did their “imperialist” opponents. At the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, the North Vietnamese concentrated 490 mortars, howitzers, and cannon against the French, at one point delivering some fifteen thousand shells in a single day. The North Koreans had a dominant advantage in heavy weapons when they invaded the South in 1950, and the copious use of firepower increased with the intervention of the Chinese. In a single month in 1953, communist forces fired 220,000 shells against United Nations forces, prompting one witness to assert, “In Korea our troops have encountered enemy artillery fires of an intensity few veterans of World War II ever experienced.”\textsuperscript{17}

Firepower in the Era of the Netherlands-Indonesia War

Many of what Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper term the “forgotten wars” of the “greater” Second World War were simultaneously continuations of prewar struggles, decolonization conflicts, and manifestations of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{18} They
often pitted religious, nationalist, and/or communist insurgents against allegedly “colonial” or “imperialist” forces, but all were complicated by ethnic, sectarian, communal, regional, class, and civil dissension. In most conflicts both government and antigovernment forces employed heavy indirect weapons. But with the exception of a few incidents, artillery and aviation remained secondary to more traditional small-war tactics such as patrolling, offensive operations, and protecting key towns and installations. Blurring the line between combatant and noncombatant, military and civil operations were often combined in coercive measures to separate guerrillas from the populace and extend government control: resettlement and ethnic expulsions; social engineering through compulsory education, civic associations, and loyalty programs; social and economic reforms; prison camps; food control; curfews; mass arrests; extrajudicial punishments; and so forth. Their cumulative effects forced the guerrillas into depopulated, isolated regions where they could be more easily targeted by artillery and aviation. Firepower—in the form of indirect heavy weapons—thus augmented military operations, but it was not the primary means of enforcing control over the population or inflicting casualties on the enemy.19

The Greek Civil War serves as an informative introduction to the post–Second World War conflicts if for no other reason than it complicates arguments that Western forces were more willing to use heavy weapons against Asians. As with other contemporary conflicts, Greece’s was a complex internal conflict internationalized by the Cold War. The communist Democratic Army of Greece (GDA) initially fought as small gangs of guerrillas, but increasingly sought to control territory, requiring it to adopt the weapons and methods of conventional forces. The Greek National Army (GNA) underwent a similar evolution from right-wing vigilantes and demoralized reservists to a professional, combined-arms force. In what was to be a common aspect of postwar conflicts, both sides were equipped, trained, and supported by communist or capitalist powers.

The use of heavy weapons on both sides was impressive. In one 1949 operation, the Greek National Army captured 14 artillery pieces, almost 200 mortars, and over 600 machine guns. By that time, the GNA itself possessed 175 medium field guns, almost 600 tanks and armored cars, and a growing air force. But if the quantity of ordnance grew, so did the quality of its application. Initially both sides used artillery with little military skill, and even less concern for civilian casualties. Observers repeatedly criticized the tendency of GNA commanders to rely on air strikes and artillery barrages rather than engage the enemy with their infantry at close quarters. By mid-1948, American and British aid led to a rapid increase in military efficiency against the communist forces. The government’s air force underwent a similar revival, and by 1949 its fighters and bombers were an integral part of ground assaults. As important as military reforms were
the Greek government’s policies of relocating civilians—perhaps 10 percent of Greece’s population was moved—and denying food and shelter to the guerrillas. The effectiveness of these measures was augmented by the communist leadership’s disastrous decision to concentrate their forces and establish fortifications in the northern mountains, further removing them from the population. With the enemy now stationary, the GNA was able to use firepower freely to shatter the opponent’s defenses and drive the remnants of the communist forces across the border. Indirect heavy weapons thus proved decisive, but only after a combination of government population-control measures, GNA improvement, and communist mistakes had provided the optimum conditions for using them.20

The contemporary conflict in South Korea reveals many similarities to Greece. Until the North Korean invasion in June 1950, the Republic of Korea’s (ROK) security forces’ primary mission was establishing government authority in a country torn by rebellions, paramilitary violence, banditry, and guerrillas. One American witness criticized what he termed “Oriental methods of criminal investigation,” but these practices—mass incarceration, resettlement, food denial, torture, and summary executions—had been, and were being applied by Western military forces.21 Although brutal, by early 1950 these had been so effective that the North Korean leadership concluded it would have to invade the South. The North Korean forces possessed an overwhelming advantage in tanks, aviation, and artillery, outnumbering their ROK opponents in the latter by three to one. During the war’s mobile operations of 1950—when the front shifted from the southern tip to the Yalu River—both sides used firepower with little regard for civilian casualties. Although initially limited to industrial and transportation targets, after the Chinese intervention American bombers were ordered to “destroy every means of communication and every installation, city, and village” in North Korea, excepting only electrical plants.22 With the establishment of a fixed front in 1951, South Korea’s armed forces were reorganized to fight a high-firepower conventional war. The number of artillery batteries increased by 500 percent in barely a year. The results of this shift were apparent between April 1951 and April 1952, when Republic of Korea and United Nations forces fired over eleven million shells. The North Korean and Chinese forces also increased their artillery from 852 in January 1952 to 1,246 by July. As in Greece, the increased reliance on firepower reflected a shift in the military situation from small bands of guerrillas to conventional forces holding fixed positions. And, as in Greece, this led to separating combatants from the populace and allowing government forces to increase their level of firepower and target enemy combatants rather than civilians.23

The use of artillery and aviation by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) against the communist Hukbalahap insurgency showed many similarities with the Greek and Korean cases. Under the government’s “mailed fist policy,” between
1946 and 1950 the army, police, and paramilitaries conducted a brutal repression campaign that included forced resettlement, mass arrests, looting, arson, and summary executions. Unfortunately, the government forces were also guilty of corruption, brutality, rape, extrajudicial killings, and numerous other abuses. Artillery and air strikes were freely employed in much-publicized “ring of steel” operations against alleged Huk strongholds. Both at the time and later, these martial spectacles were criticized by participants, foreign observers, and the Huks themselves, though the latter benefited greatly from the increased popular hatred of the government.

The appointment of Ramon Magsaysay as secretary of defense in 1950 reversed this dire situation. As one veteran explained, “Magsaysay had a very clear understanding of the war’s objective, to win the people away from the other side over to the Philippine government’s side. You don’t do that by killing people’s innocent relatives. You don’t make war where it will hurt the people you are trying to win over; you try to strike at an identified enemy.” One of Magsaysay’s more successful initiatives was to bolster the AFP’s demoralized conscripts and police with elite Battalion Combat Teams (BCTs)—expert at patrolling, night movement, ambushes, and skirmishing. Once infantry had located a guerrilla band, the BCT could swiftly bring down fire from its organic artillery company or from air bases only a few minutes’ flight from the theater. More important than bombers and fighters were military reconnaissance aircraft used to spot guerrilla bands, sometimes calling in air strikes, sometimes harassing them with improvised bombs, and sometimes vectoring in BCT units. They also flew agricultural experts over the mountains and jungles to chart clandestine Huk farms to destroy a few weeks before the harvest. Airplanes also dropped leaflets inscribed with a large pharaonic eye to convey the impression of being under incessant surveillance. A more ruthless tactic was flying an airplane with a loudspeaker thanking a fictional informer over an area known to contain a guerrilla band. This not only demoralized the guerrillas, but it also occasionally prompted purges, so that the Huks executed some leaders and caused others to defect. Such military adaptations were made more effective by other programs that relocated thousands and destroyed villages and crops. Separated from their information and supply network, the Huks had to disperse to survive and were reduced to spending much of their time attempting to grow food in the inhospitable jungles and mountains. With guerrillas segregated from their civilian supporters, the AFP shifted to more firepower-intensive military tactics. Such measures effectively ended the conflict within three years, though self-styled Huks ranging from vigilantes to vice lords continue to this day.

The British senior command in Malaya was initially skeptical about the utility of mid-spectrum firepower in what they misperceived as a race war between
Chinese and Malays. From 1947 to 1950 members of the Royal Artillery in theater were often detached to infantry duty, and as the government forces were undermanned and much of the territory was contested, naval and land artillery and aviation targeted guerrilla concentrations. The decision to remove much of the rural Chinese population to protected camps gradually separated the guerrillas from their logistical, informational, and recruiting support. As the government forces began clearing the more populated areas and the guerrilla bands were broken up and driven into the depopulated jungle fringe, there was more emphasis on indirect fire for harassment and interdiction. In Operation Nassau, field and naval guns fired over sixty thousand rounds, and in one month in 1953 a single battery fired over seventeen thousand shells from thirty separate locations, moving its guns over sixteen hundred miles. Most of these missions were to destroy guerrilla camps located by infantry patrols and “flush” guerrillas into ambushes. But aviation’s contribution to observation, reconnaissance, and resupply were equally important to the success of the counterinsurgency campaign. To obviate the danger of “friendly fire,” the British ruled that artillery and aviation could not be used within five hundred yards of troops or civilians.26

Preliminary Conclusions

These brief summaries provide a framework for establishing “standard operating military procedure” for indirect firepower at the time of the Indonesian-Netherlands conflict. Perhaps the most important commonality is that in all cases indirect firepower was what modern military nomenclature terms a “force multiplier.” It augmented the capacity of the military forces, providing lethal or destructive effects that would have been otherwise impossible. It extended the range and effectiveness of government forces and allowed them to stage offensive operations against an enemy already weakened by food control and population removal measures. These conflicts became increasingly military-versus-military encounters between small patrols in which “the support of the indirect fire,” as one veteran of the Huk campaign maintained, was “the most important consideration.”27 Artillery drove guerrillas into ambushes, smashed their camps, and harassed them day and night. Aviation provided an offensive capacity that extended far beyond the infantry patrols and artillery range, though its effects were often hard to ascertain. One Philippine officer recalled the most successful air strike he knew of was on a Huk mountain camp that killed twenty-seven guerrillas. But he noted that the bombs had missed the camp completely: only by luck had they fallen on the fleeing guerrillas. And it required an infantry patrol to march for two days through the jungles and hills to ascertain the damage.28 Based
on this and other anecdotal evidence, most casualty figures ascribed to artillery or air strikes are unverified “guesstimates.”

A second commonality was that the use of “heavy weapons” was limited by a variety of factors, from environmental to economic. These were conflicts fought in terrain that ranged from jungle to grassland to mountains (in some cases all three), characterized by unpredictable weather (inimical to both gunnery and flying), and by a lack of surveying or mapping that so reduced accuracy that several missions were canceled. The lack of visibility and accurate maps made “friendly fire” or amicide a persistent concern, especially when supporting unseen troops in close combat. To these environmental factors were added such logistical problems as building and maintaining fire bases or airfields in areas with primitive roads and little infrastructure. For forces fighting on an economic shoestring—as these were—artillery, tanks, and airplanes were prohibitively expensive. In many cases cannons, tanks, and even personal weapons were salvaged from wartime battlefields and maintained through improvised supply systems. In 1950 the combined field artillery of the French forces in Indochina was some four hundred guns, with almost a quarter of them unusable owing to age or disrepair. Shortages in munitions, fuel, warehousing, and spare parts were common. And for those using artillery or aviation, the cost was not simply the weapons and ordnance themselves, but the skilled personnel needed for their use and maintenance. Artillery training required far more time than infantry training, especially for officers, and pilot training was even lengthier. And dispersing artillery and aviation near to infantry for combined-arms operations also required dozens of soldiers to act as cooks, mechanics, drivers, security, and other support.29

A more contested attribute of artillery and aviation was what Callwell termed its “moral effect.” The evidence for this is somewhat contradictory and anecdotal. The dramatic visual effects of artillery or aviation strikes were terrifying, although Huk leader Luis Taruc claimed his guerrillas were indifferent to them. But the diary of the Huk who ghostwrote Taruc’s autobiography contains many entries on the demoralization caused by the constant presence of observation aircraft, and the ensuing air, artillery, or infantry attack.30

The lessons drawn by military officers who participated in or studied these campaigns reached a consensus about the role of firepower in counterguerrilla operations. They concluded, as did Stephen Paget about naval gunfire in Malaya, that its military effectiveness was “situationally dependent.”31 Unless the enemy concentrated to defend territory, the majority of air and gunfire was expended on harassment, the interdiction of supply routes and trails, and “flushing” the guerrillas into infantry ambushes. In Malaya one flight crew assigned to an infantry unit was credited with inflicting more casualties than the rest of the squadron’s air missions combined. However, as in the Philippines, British veterans of this
campaign did not view “body counts” as the measure of aviation’s success. They gave equal credit to reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, psychological operations, transport, and logistics.\textsuperscript{32}

The crucial factor in the Philippines, Greece, and Malaya was the government’s ability to segregate guerrillas from the civilian support base. Once that was achieved, there was both a greater likelihood that artillery and aviation would be militarily effective and a corresponding effort to avoid collateral damage against property and people. In both cases, Western forces sought a balance of ensuring that their heavy weapons had maximum effect without causing excessive and counterproductive destruction. For some counterinsurgency theorists, it led to a significant reappraisal of how to evaluate the effectiveness of their firepower. One example of this reappraisal appeared in the US Army’s 1963 counterinsurgency manual. The manual, which drew explicitly on the Hukbalahap campaign, broke with the army’s conventional warfare doctrine and insisted “the psychological impact of artillery in support of counterguerrilla operations will probably be out of proportion to the damage that the fire has actually accomplished.” Indeed, damage was almost secondary to artillery’s importance as “a two-prong morale factor; it is both devastating to the guerrilla and reassuring to the counterguerrilla.”\textsuperscript{33} In another break with conventional doctrine, the manual emphasized the vital importance of careful planning and discrimination, so that “the resulting artillery fires will not cause ill effects or perhaps alienate the population and cause them to support the insurgents.”\textsuperscript{34} Whatever their army’s later practices in Vietnam, American counterinsurgents both acknowledged their debt to earlier irregular conflicts and sought to incorporate their perceived lessons of firepower discrimination and restraint.

\textbf{Netherlands-Indonesia War}

As in most independence struggles in this period, the Indonesian National Army (TNI) never acquired the amount of heavy weaponry and trained personnel necessary to match the colonial power.\textsuperscript{35} Dutch forces remained tactically superior to the TNI in all but a few minor regular combat situations.\textsuperscript{36} As a result, the TNI leadership’s adoption of guerrilla strategy in 1947 was the only way to expel the Dutch armed forces without risking self-destruction. As the First Indochina War shows, this level of asymmetry was not inevitable. With Chinese support, the Vietminh gradually succeeded in creating conventional forces with a sizable arsenal of support weapons after 1949. Its massed artillery and level of training and organization played a decisive role in the crucial battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.
In Indonesia, the battle of Surabaya taught the belligerents important lessons early in the conflict and paved the way for a different outcome. After the Japanese capitulation on 15 August 1945, followed two days later by the Indonesian Proclamation of Independence, British-Indian troops temporarily occupied several so-called key areas in the archipelago. In Surabaya in November 1945 the heaviest battle of the entire war would take place, in which artillery, air power, tanks, and naval gunfire all played an important part. During the initial stages of the fighting, inadequately armed British-Indian units were overrun by numerically superior Indonesian fighters. British losses ran into the hundreds. After Brigadier Mallaby, commander of the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade, was killed by insurgents on October 30, General Sir Philip Christison (commander of the Indonesian theater) famously threatened “to bring the whole weight of my sea, land and air forces and all the weapons of modern war against them until they are crushed,” a warning that was acted on ten days later, on November 10. The British opened with a naval bombardment by three destroyers, followed by a bombing campaign from the air by RAF Thunderbolts and Mosquitos and from land by the Royal Artillery. After weeks of heavy fighting and thousands of Indonesian
casualties, the British regained control over the city, whose inhabitants had by then mostly fled to the surrounding countryside.

The fight taught the belligerents important lessons early in the conflict. The Indonesians experienced that conventional battles, fought largely with confiscated Japanese war matériel supplemented by a range of improvised weapons, produced unacceptably high casualties among their own troops. Although after Surabaya Indonesian forces waged several other conventional-style battles in regions where the Dutch sought to expand their presence after taking over control from the British, eventually the TNI leadership felt forced to fully adopt guerrilla tactics.

The British occupational forces on their part drew the lesson from Surabaya to resort more to firepower in order to prevent a repetition of the early stages of the fighting. According to Major General D. C. Hawthorn, commander of the 23rd Indian Division, indirect-fire support weapons had proven their worth during the battle. In a training instruction issued afterward, drawing lessons from Surabaya, he concluded, “Should we again be involved in this type of fighting the maximum use of all weapons must be made from the outset.” Equally, the Dutch concluded, after a report from a General Staff colonel who toured Indonesia when the fighting in Surabaya was still going on, they should augment their troops with more support weapons. With those they would be able to deal the Indonesian forces a “decisive blow” during a large-scale operation. Five months after the battle, when Dutch units were still fighting under British command, the commander of the Netherlands Marines Brigade again stressed the need for heavier firepower: “Contrary to what many people think (presumably by deliberately wanting to keep hidden the actual state of war), there is heavy fighting for Surabaya going on. The nature of the opposition is such that it cannot be broken without artillery, tanks and other heavy auxiliary weapons. The English commander General Mansergh will, after 5 years of war experience in Burma etc., be the first to confirm this.”

A final way in which the battle of Surabaya set the stage was in how the use of force by both sides was framed. Although the British had won the battle, they would remember it as the “Hell of Surabaya,” while to Indonesians November 10 became known as the opposite: Heroes Day, a national holiday to this date. This can be partly explained by the disparity in armament. In British literature one finds many accounts of horrified Indian Army soldiers appalled by the fanaticism of the pemuda fighters (“drunk and half crazed at the sight of blood”), who stormed Sherman tanks with bamboo spears and knives and employed suicide squads with explosives against British armor. British accounts of Indonesian use of tanks, artillery, and other heavy weapons during the battle are plentiful, but stress the lack of expertise among the newly formed Indonesian troops in handling them.
In Indonesian historiography, by contrast, the use of heavy weapons by the nationalist fighters was downplayed in favor especially of the bamboo spear (bambu runcing), which came to symbolize not only the David-versus-Goliath-like heroism of the battle, but also the revolutionary spirit of the Indonesian freedom fighter. The British offensive was on the other hand portrayed as brutal, barbarous, causing excessive civilian casualties, and being in violation of international conventions on the conduct of war. This pattern repeated itself during the rest of the conflict between the Indonesians and the Dutch, in which each party would accuse the other of fighting cowardly and utilizing the wrong methods. The Indonesian fighters were criticized for not fighting “properly” in European eyes and hiding among civilians, the Dutch for using conventional weapons against both fighters and civilians (a variant of the Vann–Westerling argument).

The Dutch army commander in the Netherlands East Indies General Simon Spoor was a strong advocate of a conventional strategy to defeat the Indonesian Republic. But a large-scale offensive operation had to be postponed until mid-1947, when the troop buildup had reached the minimal required level. When Operation Product (also called the “First Police Action” by the Dutch, or the “First Dutch Military Aggression” by Indonesians), from 21 July to 4 August 1947, got under way, General Spoor had at his disposal around one hundred thousand troops, supported by twenty-two field artillery batteries and a total of eleven air force squadrons, seven of which were bomber and/or fighter squadrons—the same as the number of Royal Air Force combat squadrons used against a much smaller insurgent movement in Malaya. Dutch combat capacity consisted of B-25 medium bomber and strafer planes, and Spitfire Mark IX, P-51 Mustang, and P-40 Kitty Hawk fighter planes, all belonging to the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army Air Force (ML-KNIL). These were supplemented by Fairey Firefly Mk I fighter-bombers and Consolidated FBY Catalina flying boats employed by the Netherlands Naval Aviation Service (MLD) for fire support. This amounted to 150–175 planes for bombing, fighting, and strafing (machine-gunning ground targets) missions, but in reality only one-third of those were actually available, because of continuous shortages of crews and spare parts. Even when fully operational, these forces were still limited means when compared to, for example, those of the French in Algeria, who had three to four hundred attack aircraft at their disposal in a country with only one-sixth of the population of Indonesia.

The field artillery batteries consisted of two sections, both equipped with four QF twenty-five-pounder field guns. According to one of the Dutch artillery instructors, this light field gun had been “one of the miracles of the war,” superior to the 105 millimeter howitzers, mounted on Sherman tanks, to be used as artillery by the five-thousand-strong Marine Brigade sent to East Java. Later, a separate artillery battalion was created for the Marine Brigade, as the Shermans proved to be too heavy and cumbersome in the Indonesian terrain. Additionally,
some infantry battalions, laying hands on prewar KNIL guns, constructed three “illegal artillery” units on their own, which supported their battalions during Operation Product. When the troop buildup was complete, the Dutch forces in Indonesia had a total of around 150 field guns.

Initially the artillery units were organized on the divisional level, but as soon as they arrived in Indonesia, the batteries were divided among the brigades, as the likelihood for divisional operations was deemed low. During Operation Product, many batteries were included in offensive columns into which the infantry brigades had been divided. In addition to field artillery, the Dutch forces were also equipped with antitank guns and grenade and rocket launchers, as well as antiaircraft guns, which turned out to be superfluous and thus, in some rare cases, were trained on ground targets instead. In sum, the Dutch had considerable means to use technisch geweld. However, like the French in Indochina and some other cases described above, the Dutch armed forces—military aviation in particular—were operated on a shoestring and had to be spread over vast areas. Finding spare parts, ammunition, and skilled personnel was a continuous limitation to actual combat power. In the course of time, this became more problematic for the
Netherlands than, for example, the French in Indochina, as heavy US equipment started to flow more freely to Indochina from 1949, while both the US and the British government put increasingly tight restrictions on arms sales to the Dutch East Indies after the 1947 military offensive.

During the operation, some artillery units initially carried out a preplanned creeping barrage (vuurwals) to clear out possible resistance on parts of the route the combat columns would follow on the first day of the offensive. In the days after, artillery provided fire support for infantry units that occupied cities and carried out mopping-up operations in their vicinity. For the ML-KNIL, their most important task during Operation Product was to destroy the Indonesian Air Force (AURI), mainly consisting of Japanese warplanes. The operation was carried out successfully, after which the AURI was unable to play a significant role during the rest of the conflict, apart from some minor raids. In one such attack, on the city of Semarang during Operation Product, bombs were dropped from a Japanese “Nate,” killing seven Indonesians. In search of this plane, Dutch pilots later that day shot down an Indian DC-3 Dakota carrying medicine and supplies to Yogyakarta, killing eight passengers, among whom were several founding fathers of Indonesian aviation. While the event is still widely commemorated in Indonesia, it is largely absent in Dutch historiography on air operations during the First Police Action, which in most cases focus on the military success of the operation.

The incident was also an example of the political sensitivity of the use of air power in an asymmetric conflict like the Netherlands-Indonesia War. As the owner of the Dakota was a wealthy Indian businessman, the incident led to a diplomatic falling out with India, which was not solved until 1950, when the Dutch government supplied India with a replacement plane. India immediately transferred the plane to Indonesia, which by then had already gained its independence. While the Indonesians, in consultative bodies like the United Nations, willingly used incidents like these to stress the barbaric nature of Dutch aggression, the Netherlands made a concerted effort to cover up and downplay the use of its own air force and point to its restrictive nature.

At first glance, it might seem obvious to see the artillery and air force as having the highest military value in their classic roles during the two large-scale Dutch offensives. (The second offensive, after Product, was Operation Kraai, or Crow, which began in December 1948 and was also known as the Second Police Action or Second Dutch Military Aggression.) According to Van Doorn and Hendrix, the violent guerrilla phases that followed “offered far fewer options for these weapons; the continuing sweep operations in the occupied territory were a less rewarding project.” The authors conclude that “the limited value of these weapons in the counter-guerrilla has not prevented them from being used
extensively.” However, while artillery was important during the two major offensives, it was never decisive.

Artillery’s main contribution was in support of infantry sweeps and mopping-up operations in the months after the offensives, during which a close tactical cooperation was developed. Artillery helped infantry dominate their ground with the least possible risk. Compensating for continual shortages of troops and protecting the infantry, artillery clearly performed the abovementioned role of a force multiplier. Moral effect, that other attribute of heavy weapons, was also frequently mentioned in the Indonesian context. The official war diary of one artillery regiment acknowledged both elements: “3–6 R.V.A. participated several times in support action of Infantry V. . . . These actions with artillery bombardments aimed to break the morale of the opposing party and thereby make it possible for the own infantry to achieve the set goals with as few losses as possible!” Indeed we find many examples, particularly from the years 1946–1947, of infantry sweeps where the textbook procedure is followed: a preliminary artillery bombardment is called in to lessen the enemy’s fighting spirit and ability before the infantry moves in to clear the area. However, in regions with very low troop density, this picture did not always hold up. In 1949, after the Second Police Action, the Dutch army controlled such large swaths of land that there was a troop shortage practically everywhere where fighting was going on. Indeed, in that same year, two high-ranking artillery officers warned against the practice of requesting artillery for targets without any accompanying infantry action. A result, as the officers established, was that the enemy would leave its positions as soon as the first shells started coming in, only to regroup practically unscathed after the shelling had finished: “The wrong method thus followed only had the result that the enemy became accustomed to artillery fire and learned to successfully evade it, and then continue his activity elsewhere. Moreover, this led to a pointless waste of ammunition.”

This underlines the situationally dependent effectiveness of indirect-fire weapons. In all the asymmetric conflicts discussed in this chapter, artillery and air forces operated in service of infantry, and worked most effectively in that regard. In Indonesia, this was widely recognized both by soldiers on the ground and officials at higher levels. Dutch military leaders, for example, explicitly prohibited the use of offensive air power without cooperation with or a follow-up by ground troops. Although this directive was not always followed, it is a clear indication that the military was aware of the limited use of air power in and by itself in the Indonesian conflict. Indeed, restrictions on the use of offensive air power were already in place from the moment the first Dutch troops arrived on Java under British command and remained so for much of the war.
As we have seen above, the effectiveness of the use of indirect-fire weapons is to a large degree dependent on and tied to measures to control the population and separate it from insurgents. However, much like the French in Indochina, Dutch security forces never made an integrated effort to segregate the Indonesian civilian population from the guerrillas. This may have contributed to a less targeted use of both indirect- and direct-fire weapons than in the course of the other conflicts analyzed in this chapter. While the use of artillery and air power increased dramatically in the first half of 1949, the last year of the war, it brought the Netherlands’ forces no nearer to a military victory. Guerrilla units operating from pockets all over Java and Sumatra intensified their attacks on convoys, bridges, and military outposts, making 1949 the deadliest year for the Dutch military in Indonesia.

One of the most effective ways the Indonesian troops managed to inflict enemy casualties was the large-scale employment of mines and improvised explosives. In Indonesia the latter mostly took the form of trekbommen (“pull bombs”), mostly former Japanese ordnance dug into the ground, making road travel a Russian roulette for many Dutch convoys. These weapons, which can be viewed as an Indonesian form of technisch geweld, took an increasing toll on Dutch units, further affecting their already falling morale in the course of the conflict. In the seven months between the end of the second military offensive and the official cease-fire agreement of 10 August 1949, almost six hundred Dutch vehicles were struck by mine blasts, inflicting the majority of the more than one thousand fatal Dutch military casualties in the same period.61 As the following paragraphs clarify, casualty figures are much harder to establish on the Indonesian side.

The Wonosari “Operetta”

As mentioned in the introduction, the suggestion that heavy weapons caused the majority of Indonesian military and civilian casualties has never been substantiated nor assessed critically. Dutch historians have referred to the works of Republican military leaders T. B. Simatupang and A. H. Nasution, but the examples provided in these two standard works hardly support this claim. Whereas both officers regularly mention civilian casualties as a result of air raids or shellings, Nasution lists equally high or higher casualty figures for infantry actions and summary executions.62 In his book Report from Banaran: Experiences during the People’s War, Simatupang writes that in Dutch air raids like that on Wonosari, “it was mainly the common people who suffered.”63
However, it remains questionable if air attacks caused the bulk of the casualties in this particular case. On March 10, 1949, the Dutch unleashed a large-scale offensive against the city of Wonosari in Central Java in response to the Republican serangan umum (general attack) on Dutch-occupied Yogyakarta nine days earlier. The Dutch sent over thirty planes to Wonosari, where they expected the commander in chief of the TNI, General Sudirman, to reside. The air force bombed and strafed Wonosari before airborne troops descended at the airstrip northwest of town. For the Dutch, it was one of the largest combined operations outside of the two so-called police actions, but by contemporaneous standards it would have been seen as a small-scale offensive action. As it turned out, Republican troops had already left the area, possibly as a result of an aerial raid some two weeks earlier, which was not followed by infantry action. According to one veteran, the operation had “a certain operetta character,” which was “a typical feature of major actions.”

Ten days later, the Indonesian delegation to the United Nations picked up on the news of the attack and formally requested an investigation by the UN Commission for Indonesia (UNCI). In a communiqué issued by Nico Palar, the head of the Indonesian delegation to the Security Council, it was stated that the attack resulted in “one hundred people killed” and “five hundred houses” burned down. The local team of UNCI observers subsequently investigated the matter. As it found little evidence to support the Indonesian allegations—according to locals one civilian had been killed and ten had been wounded by aircraft fire—the UNCI concluded that “the importance of the incident has been exaggerated by the Republican circles.”

Although the Wonosari incident has been portrayed as a prime example of disproportionate technisch geweld, these findings question the suggestion that indirect-fire weapons caused large numbers of civilian casualties there. What arises from the sources is a mixed picture. In Wonosari itself, the air attack does not seem to have caused many victims. It is possible that in some of the outlying villages in the region, which were also attacked by the ML-KNIL on the same day and were not inspected by the UNCI observers, there were more casualties. A clearer picture, meanwhile, is derived from the actions of the airborne infantry, who reported forty enemy casualties during their operations in and around Wonosari. In addition, a field artillery unit that fired 974 shells in the area over the course of six days seems to have caused mainly material damage, as the unit found the region largely abandoned. Finally, a radio report from the TNI Java Command Headquarters mentioned (although the reliability of the broadcast is hard to assess) that in a related retaliation for the Indonesian serangan umum on 1 March, some two hundred inhabitants of villages surrounding Yogyakarta were rounded up and summarily executed by the Dutch as punishment for harboring guerrillas.
After societal unrest in 1969 concerning allegations of Dutch war crimes in Indonesia, the government of the Netherlands had a memorandum drawn up with excesses committed by the Dutch military.\textsuperscript{73} It is striking that this so-called \textit{Excessennota} contained not a single case of \textit{technisch geweld}. Rémy Limpach has convincingly shown that multiple cases could have been included.\textsuperscript{74} Nonetheless, the majority of known examples of Dutch atrocities during the war still consists of “direct” killing of noncombatants by infantry units or intelligence personnel. This is likely to have been similar in other decolonization conflicts. It is hard to assess whether this reflects the actual situation or merely shows the limited availability of sources on the nature of casualties. However, considering that Dutch troops were fighting an enemy often described as “invisible,” as well as the many unofficial reports that infantry patrols were told to “fire at everything that moves,” the distinction becomes increasingly blurred, making broad generalizations on casualty figures and their causes problematic—as the case of Wonosari shows.\textsuperscript{75} But it is precisely the indiscriminate nature of much of this infantry violence that challenges the assertion that “direct methods” lead to fewer innocent victims.

Our research leads us to three conclusions. Our first is that the isolated study of the war in Indonesia had led Dutch historians to speculate on the impact of \textit{technisch geweld} on the population. This has resulted in a propensity to cite specific incidents as demonstrating the excessive nature of the Dutch application of heavy weapons, such as the attack on Wonosari. But primary research into this case indicates that not only was the incident exceptional, but it is also highly uncertain that indirect gunfire caused the majority of civilian casualties there. As was the case in other armed clashes in Indonesia, and in other irregular conflicts, the effectiveness of the application of \textit{technisch geweld} was situationally dependent. More research into other controversial incidents is needed to achieve a more balanced appraisal of \textit{technisch geweld}. Our second point is that expanding the perspective to include other contemporary conflicts allows the placing of Dutch military methods into a better historical context. Apart from the definitional vagueness surrounding the term \textit{technisch geweld}, we can draw the following interrelated conclusions from this explorative comparison. Studying the use of indirect-fire weapons in the context of the “greater” Second World War shows that they were applied far more promiscuously, and with far greater destructive effects, in intra-European, intra-Asian, and conventional wars than they were in Indonesia. When compared to contemporaneous irregular conflicts, the Dutch use of \textit{technisch geweld} was similar to that of other government forces in Greece, South Korea, Malaya, and the Philippines. Like other conventional armies of the period, the Netherlands troops recognized that artillery and air power were a force multiplier, augmenting ground operations and compensating for troop
shortages. As with other contemporary armies, the Dutch valued *technisch geweld* both for its destructive effects and its perceived psychological impact. Whether it validated these expectations was due less to the inherent capabilities of *technisch geweld* than to situational variables, of which the most important was often the effectiveness of the armed opposition. That the Dutch were probably less discriminate in their use of heavy weapons in the later stages of their war was also situationally dependent. Like the French in Indochina, the Dutch failed to segregate the guerrillas from the population that supported them. Our third point is that researchers should avoid a simplistic cause-effect assumption that indirect-fire weapons are not only counterproductive but by definition more inhumane in irregular conflicts. An outright dismissal of *technisch geweld* for its “indirect” destruction runs the risk of glorifying “direct methods” such as those practiced and advocated by Captain Westerling.