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Scorched-Earth as Defensive Signaling in Bengkulu, 1945–1949: A Microhistorical Process-Tracing Study

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ABSTRACT

This study reconstructs the planning, enactment, and immediate consequences of scorched-earth (*bumi hangus*) operations in Bengkulu during Indonesia's Revolutionary War (1945–1949), situating Colonel Barlian's leadership within the intertwined logics of coercion and protection under severe resource constraints. Using a qualitative, microhistorical case design, we compiled multi-source evidence archival dispatches and administrative minutes, wartime press and photographs, memoirs, local chronicles, and a small set of oral-history interviews screened by provenance and subjected to systematic source criticism. Analysis combined event chronology, inductive coding, and process tracing to link command intent, inter-organizational coordination, engineering practice, and short-term outcomes, with cross-source triangulation and retention of negative cases to test rival explanations. Results indicate that denial measures were calibrated rather than ad hoc: targeted bridge demolitions, controlled destruction of administrative assets, and route obstruction were synchronized with civilian movement to slow mechanized advance, deny administrative utility, and signal non-cooperation; learning effects were evident in the shift from earlier demolition failures to engineer-guided weak-point targeting, and intermediary civic organizations proved crucial for logistics, reception, and communication. We conclude that Bengkulu's *bumi hangus* constituted a bounded defensive repertoire embedded in local geography, logistics, and institutional capacity, and that representational scarcity (thin visual archives) has contributed to its underrepresentation relative to Java-centric narratives. Limitations include single-site scope, fragmentary and sometimes propagandistic sources, and the absence of systematic engineering logs despite mitigation via triangulation and weighting by credibility. Implications: decolonization historiography should systematically incorporate defensive signaling and infrastructure denial alongside offensive episodes; archival recovery should prioritize provincial visual/technical records; and future research should extend comparative testing across coastal Sumatra, integrate Dutch–Indonesian technical logs to estimate delay effects, and develop geospatial reconstructions linking demolition sequencing, route interdictions, and civilian protection at scale.

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Introduction

Indonesia's Revolutionary War (1945–1949) is increasingly interpreted as a complex assemblage of decolonization, state formation, and mass mobilization, whose trajectories diverged across regions as military, political, and social actors improvised under scarcity and

diplomatic uncertainty. Recent scholarship moves beyond monolithic national narratives toward empirically dense microhistories attentive to contingency, locality, and the circulation of ideas, images, and tactics (Ploeg, 2020; Romijn, 2020; Suwignyo, 2022). This historiographical realignment underscores not only the plurality of revolutionary experiences but also the need to situate events within specific geographies and institutional capacities rather than assuming centralized uniformity (Ploeg, 2020; Romijn, 2020; Suwignyo, 2022).

Building on that turn, international analyses have re-examined violence, logistics, and political signalling how irregular warfare, strategic withdrawals, scorched-earth actions, and diplomacy cohered into repertoires of coercion and protection and have foregrounded the co-production of security regimes by military units and local intermediaries. Such work demonstrates that tactical choices were path-dependent and locally configured, conditioned by supply chains, command bandwidth, and communications with regional authorities (Jagtiani, 2022; Oostindie & Steijlen, 2021; Scholtz, 2019). The resulting picture is one of fluid tactical adaptation, wherein leadership decisions and material constraints interacted to shape both battlefield outcomes and civilian experiences (Jagtiani, 2022; Oostindie & Steijlen, 2021; Scholtz, 2019).

Complementing these international accounts, Indonesian Sinta-indexed studies enrich understanding of grassroots experience and urban–rural contrasts, documenting how humanitarian organizations (e.g., nascent Red Cross formations), agrarian mobilizations (e.g., Barisan Tani Indonesia), and voluntary associations contributed to community protection, provisioning, and political legitimacy amid shifting frontlines (Arvianita & Basuki, 2023; Rosalinda et al., 2024). Scholars also highlight the evidentiary and mnemonic power of visual sources photographs, press images, and later appropriations which mediate public memory and analytical claims about violence and agency, thereby expanding both methods and interpretive debates (Ploeg, 2020; Protschky, 2020; Zara, 2024). Together, these strands encourage a multilayered reading of the revolution that integrates organizational histories, material infrastructures, and representational practices (Arvianita & Basuki, 2023; Protschky, 2020; Zara, 2024).

Within this broader discourse, comparative work indicates that coercive and protective measures ranging from asset denial and infrastructure destruction to evacuation and reorganization of civilian services were rarely isolated events. Rather, they were embedded in leadership repertoires, organizational bandwidth, and temporal pressures that varied by locale, and they often sought to signal resolve while mitigating civilian risk (Herlina et al., 2023; Romijn, 2020; Scholtz, 2019). These studies collectively suggest that assessing revolutionary decision-making requires tracing how command intent interacted with logistics, institutional supports, and communicative strategies to produce both immediate effects and durable memory politics (Herlina et al., 2023; Romijn, 2020; Scholtz, 2019).

Despite this progress, provincial theaters outside Java's major urban centers remain underrepresented, particularly along Sumatra's southwest littoral where communications, leadership repertoires, and resource scarcities plausibly conditioned how national directives translated into local defensive strategies. Current accounts provide suggestive analogues from Java and selected Sumatran cities but offer little systematic reconstruction for Bengkulu's revolutionary experience (Gunawan et al., 2021; Wijaya, 2020). Moreover, while research on

visual culture and documentary traces has clarified how the revolution is represented and reappropriated, Bengkulu's visual and textual archives remain under-mined for reconstructing operational sequences and leadership rationales, including the planning and consequences of scorched-earth (*bumi hangus*) actions (Protschky, 2020; Rosalinda et al., 2024; Zara, 2024). Accordingly, this article develops a microhistorical reconstruction of Bengkulu's revolutionary theater centered on Colonel Barlian's leadership during *bumi hangus* operations, asking (i) how local command interpreted national directives; (ii) how institutional and logistical constraints transport, communications, provisioning, and the availability of civilian organizations shaped timing and scope; and (iii) how these choices reverberated in civilian life and later memory politics (Herlina et al., 2023; Romijn, 2020; Suwignyo, 2022). By situating Bengkulu as a distinct operational and social space and triangulating documentary, visual, and oral materials, the study aims to clarify the planning, rationale, and consequences of asset-denial decisions; to map the interface of leadership, organizational capacity, and civilian protection; and to reposition Bengkulu within national and comparative debates on decolonization warfare, coercion/protection, and local agency (Ploeg, 2020; Romijn, 2020; Zara, 2024).

Methods

 study employed a qualitative, microhistorical case design to reconstruct how scorched-earth (*bumi hangus*) decisions were conceived, authorized, and enacted in Bengkulu during Indonesia's Revolutionary War (1945–1949), with particular attention to Colonel Barlian's leadership, organizational bandwidth, and downstream civilian effects. The temporal scope was bounded to 1945–1949, and the spatial focus to Bengkulu and its southwest Sumatran hinterland; references to adjacent theatres were used solely to contextualize sequences rather than to create parallel comparative cases. This design was selected to recover decision processes and implementation logics that are often obscured in macro-level narratives, while remaining sensitive to locality, timing, and institutional capacity.

Evidence was assembled through multi-source archival and documentary research, including national and provincial repositories; publicly accessible digitized collections of newspapers, photographs, maps, and communiqués; published memoirs; local administrative minutes; and vetted private collections. Where documentary gaps materially affected interpretation, a small set of oral-history interviews with surviving witnesses or descendants was conducted to clarify event sequences, institutional roles, and social consequences. Inclusion criteria required that each item (i) fell within the period of interest, (ii) referred substantively to Bengkulu in relation to operations, logistics, command, or civilian protection, and (iii) possessed verifiable provenance sufficient for external and internal source criticism. All items were logged in a structured database capturing repository identifiers, dates, authorship, genre, and a brief reliability appraisal; Indonesian- and Dutch-language materials were transcribed and translated into English with cross-checks for semantic accuracy.

Analytic procedures unfolded in four stages. First, a dated chronology was constructed from contemporaneous traces to anchor subsequent inference. Second, texts and images were open-coded and then organized into axial categories: leadership intent and orders; inter-organizational coordination across military, police, and civic bodies; logistical constraints (transport, supply, communications); action repertoires (evacuation, asset denial, protection);

and outcomes (displacement, casualties, infrastructure loss, political signalling). Third, process-tracing tests examined whether observed outcomes were plausibly linked to stated intentions and constraints, weighing alternative pathways and sequencing evidence for inferential leverage.

Fourth, cross-source triangulation reconciled discrepancies and retained negative or disconfirming cases to probe rival explanations rather than forcing premature convergence. Rigor and trustworthiness were strengthened through method and source triangulation, systematic source criticism (authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning), peer debriefing within the research team, and maintenance of an audit trail comprising documentary logs, codebook iterations, and dated analytic memos. Reflexive notes recorded the researchers' positionality and assumptions at key decision points, and sensitivity analyses were conducted by re-weighting evidence classes (e.g., privileging contemporaneous dispatches over retrospective memoirs) to test the stability of interpretations.

Ethical procedures followed standard historical-research and oral-history guidelines. Archival materials were used in accordance with repository conditions; for interviews, informed consent was obtained, identifiers were masked, and audio files and transcripts were stored under access controls. Limitations inherent to the design—archival lacunae, propagandistic or partial sources, and possible recall bias in oral accounts—were mitigated by privileging contemporaneous records when available, explicitly weighting sources by credibility, and reporting evidentiary uncertainty alongside claims. Collectively, these procedures were intended to produce a transparent, replicable reconstruction of decision making and implementation in Bengkulu's revolutionary theatre.

Results and Discussion

Biographical and Institutional Centext

The reconstruction identifies Colonel Barlian as the pivotal field decision-maker in Bengkulu's defensive posture, with authority to issue orders across military domains and to coordinate with police and civic bodies. Archival traces and biographical passages show a leadership profile forged through early schooling (HIS/MULO), wartime paramilitary training (Gyugun/Heiho; participation in civic auxiliaries such as *Seinendan* and *Keibodan*), and subsequent command responsibilities in South Sumatra. This profile helps explain Barlian's preference for denial strategies and for leveraging engineering expertise available through regional command networks when conventional force ratios were unfavorable.

From Occupation to Proclamation Early

Local sequences indicate that Japanese capitulation catalyzed rapid political mobilization across the Bengkulu region. Oral and documentary fragments converge that Manna proclaimed earliest (August 1945), followed by Kepahiang (early September), and Curup (25 September 1945). Former Gyugun/Heiho members served as carriers of information and rudimentary organizational know-how, seeding village-level vigilance and paramilitary drill. These early mobilizations later provided the human infrastructure for evacuation, logistics, and asset-denial operations during Dutch pressure.

Decision Environment and Triggering Event (1947-January-1949)

The decision environment for scorched-earth (bumi hangus) actions coalesced amid intensified Dutch operations, logistical vulnerabilities, and lessons learned from earlier demolition failures. A notable antecedent is the unsuccessful destruction of the Kebu bridge near Lahat during Clash I (July 1947), which sharpened attention to engineering skills and sequencing. Subsequent mentoring from Legiun Mangkunegaran (Zenie engineers) and senior Sumatra command figures (arriving in 1946) addressed technical deficits in explosive placement and structural weak-point targeting. By late 1948, telegram traffic and troop movements suggested imminent Dutch advances; on 5 January 1949 Dutch forces seized Bengkulu after brief engagements under Lt. I Nawawi Manaf acting on Barlian's instructions, validating local perceptions that denial and delay would be tactically necessary.

Enactment of Scorched-Eaerth Measures

Witness-style narratives describe towering plumes of smoke, successive concussions, and the emotional toll of seeing a familiar city deliberately destroyed. Short-term effects included diminished urban functionality and heightened isolation due to the combined destruction and the absence of rapid reconstruction capacity. While the measures plausibly imposed tactical frictions on the adversary, they also generated civilian hardship (displacement, access constraints) that local commanders recognized but accepted as a trade-off given the expected scope of the Dutch offensive.

Synthesis of Event and Sources

Table 1 consolidates dated waypoints, principal actors, and source types that underpin the chronology. It functions as the empirical spine for subsections 2–5.

Table 1. Bengkulu revolutionary timeline and evidentiary anchors (1945–1949)

Date/Period	Event/Decision	Principal actors	Evidentiary base (type)
Aug 1945	Earliest local proclamation in Manna; youth cadres mobilized	Local leaders; ex-Gyugun/Heiho	Local proclamations; memoir fragments; press notes
Early Sep 1945	Kepahiang proclamation; diffusion of organizing know-how	Former Gyugun/Heiho; village guards	Oral recollections; administrative notes
25 Sep 1945	Curup proclamation at ~10:00 WIB	District officials; youth groups	Dated proclamation text; witness notes
1946	Arrival of Sumatra command leaders; engineering mentorship	Maj. Gen. Sutopo; *Legiun Mangkunegaran* (Zenie)	Command orders; training notes

Date/Period	Event/Decision	Principal actors	Evidentiary base (type)
Jul 1947	Failed demolition of Kebu bridge during *Clash I*	Local demolition teams	After-action recollection; telegram extracts
Late 1948	Escalating Dutch movements; denial planning intensifies	Barlian; staff officers	Telegram summaries; planning notes
5 Jan 1949	Dutch seize Bengkulu after brief engagement	Lt. I Nawawi Manaf under Barlian's orders	Situation reports; local chronicles
Early Jan 1949	Scorched-earth operations executed around critical nodes	Engineering/demolition teams	Narrative accounts; structural debris mapping

Mechanism and Outcomes

Table 2 connects specific measures to their intended mechanisms and observed short-term effects. It clarifies how leadership intent translated into action repertoires under resource constraint

Table 2. Action–mechanism–outcome synthesis for *bumi hangus*

Measure	Operationalization	Intended mechanism	Observed short-term effects
Bridge denial	Targeted explosive placement at joints/weak points; timed charges	Disrupt mobility; delay armor /logistics	Route interdictions; detour requirements; localized isolation
Building destruction	Controlled burns of administrative/strategic sites	Remove cover/utility; signal non-cooperation	Loss of colonial infrastructure; visible deterrent signalling
Route obstruction	Debris fields; chokepoints on arterial roads	Slow mechanized advance; complicate resupply	Slower ingress; traffic dispersion
Civilian movement	Directed evacuation from high-risk blocks	Reduce casualties; free maneuver space	Displacement; pressure on reception areas

Triangulation across textual traces (dispatches, proclamations, administrative minutes), biographical material, and witness-style narratives supports the sequencing of proclamations, the role of engineer mentorship, and the timing of denial operations relative to Dutch advances. Negative cases such as the earlier Kebu bridge failure were retained to test claims about learning and technical adaptation. Where sources conflicted on time stamps or locations, contemporaneous documents were privileged and uncertainties are reported in the notes accompanying Tables 1–2.

Discussion

The Bengkulu reconstruction shows that scorched-earth actions were not ad hoc eruptions of destruction but a calibrated repertoire deployed under unfavorable force ratios to delay mechanized advance, deny administrative utility, and signal non-cooperation. This pattern resonates with international reassessments of the Indonesian Revolution that treat coercion and protection as intertwined logics embedded in local geographies and organizational capacity, rather than as centrally uniform scripts (Jagtiani, 2022; Romijn, 2020; Scholtz, 2019). In contrast with studies that foreground offensive signaling such as the 1 March 1949 operation in Yogyakarta as a dramatic assertion of sovereignty Bengkulu's asset-denial strategy illustrates a defensive signaling repertoire that sought to shape tempo and meaning through obstruction and destruction, a complement to the more often cited offensive episodes (Herlina et al., 2023; Political & Change, 2023; Purwanto et al., 2023). Together these comparisons suggest that revolutionary "success" cannot be reduced to battlefield seizures alone; it also hinged on the tactical management of mobility, infrastructure, and message effects.

Leadership and intermediaries emerge as decisive in translating national directives into feasible local action. Our evidence that Colonel Barlian combined denial orders with coordination across police and civic bodies aligns with work showing that wartime governance was co-produced by military units and local organizations which provided logistics, care, and social legitimation under uncertainty (Arvianita & Basuki, 2023; Ningsih, 2024; Suwignyo, 2022). Whereas Suwignyo (2022) highlights teachers as agents of "soft decolonisation" and building on Ningsih (2024) analysis of East Java (1945–1949), women's provisioning work procurement, preservation, rationing, and the organization of communal kitchens and neighborhood food stores functioned as the connective tissue that translated wartime directives into survivable daily routines. Rather than merely supplementing military efforts, these women-led networks coordinated information flows, stabilized staples under price and mobility shocks, and received or fed evacuees, thereby buffering households and fighters when infrastructure denial and route interdictions disrupted normal supply chains. Read against our Bengkulu reconstruction, this comparison suggests that the operational efficacy of coercive measures (e.g., asset denial, evacuation) was contingent on the simultaneous activation of civilian infrastructures for protection and provisioning and that such infrastructures were often gendered and locally embedded, with women's collective labor converting command intent into practicable care and logistics (Arvianita & Basuki, 2023; Ningsih, 2024; Suwignyo, 2022).

A further point of convergence with the wider literature is the role of learning and technical adaptation. The documented failure to demolish the Kebu bridge during *Clash I* and

subsequent adjustments informed by engineer mentorship mirror arguments that tactical repertoires evolved through feedback from operational shortcomings and changes in organizational bandwidth (Jagtiani, 2022; Romijn, 2020; Scholtz, 2019). While most studies trace high-level operational cycles or national command debates, the Bengkulu case renders visible the mid-level mechanics of adaptation sequencing of charges, targeting of structural weak points, synchronization with civilian movement that transform a blunt idea ("destroy the bridge") into an executable plan under local constraints (Oostindie et al., 2018; Purwanto et al., 2023). This helps bridge the gap between macro-strategy and street-level implementation.

The findings also intersect with research on visuality and memory. International work demonstrates how photographs and press images shaped both contemporary and retrospective understandings of agency and violence. Bengkulu's descriptions of smoke plumes, sequential detonations, and charred administrative shells underscore why visual traces if collected could have carried extraordinary mnemonic weight; yet, unlike Java-centric theaters richly represented in iconic images, Bengkulu's visual archive remains thin. This asymmetry supports the claim that representational economies skew scholarly attention and public memory toward certain repertoires and locales, calling for targeted recovery of provincial images and ephemera (Ploeg, 2020; Protschky, 2020; Zara, 2024).

Relative to Indonesian microhistories that focus on Java or Bali, the Bengkulu case broadens the geographic canvas and affirms that provincial theaters along Sumatra's southwest littoral were shaped by distinctive communications and supply ecologies. Where prior microhistories emphasize social violence or everyday improvisation, our reconstruction centers the coupling of command intent and organizational capacity in a resource-scarce defensive posture. The juxtaposition suggests that the Indonesian Revolution comprised overlapping micro-wars with different ratios of offense to denial, each configuring civilian risk and protection through specific institutional mixes.

The principal novelty of this study lies in integrating four elements seldom treated together in provincial theaters outside Java: a process-traced linkage from leadership intent to engineering practice; the embedding of denial measures within concurrent protective moves; the explicit mapping of intermediary civilian organizations that made coercion operationally and morally sustainable; and a reflexive account of how representational scarcity shapes what can be known about defensive repertoires. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the analytical payoff of combining archival fragments, oral recollections, and process tracing to move from evocative anecdotes to a defensible sequence of causes and effects. Substantively, it reframes scorched-earth not as indiscriminate destruction but as a bounded repertoire geared to delay, denial, and signaling under tight constraints.

For historiography, the case invites a recalibration of decolonization narratives to include defensive signaling and infrastructure denial as core repertoires rather than peripheral tactics, encouraging comparative mapping across under-studied provinces. For sources and method, it underscores the need to invest in provincial archival recovery particularly visual and engineering records and to triangulate military, civic, and humanitarian paperwork to reconstruct the coercion protection interface. For public history and education, incorporating provincial microhistories like Bengkulu can diversify curricula and memorial practices, foregrounding the

civilian infrastructures that sustained communities during disruptive denial operations (Feuer, 2023; Saputra et al., 2023; Utami et al., 2024) .

As a single-site microhistory reliant on fragmentary archives and a small number of oral recollections, the study cannot claim statistical generalizability; propagandistic or retrospective sources may distort chronology and intent, and the thin visual archive constrains representational analysis. We mitigated these risks by privileging contemporaneous documents when available, weighting sources by credibility, and retaining conflicting traces as negative cases, yet residual uncertainty persists. Future research should extend the comparative frame to parallel coastal provinces, link Dutch and Indonesian engineering logs to quantify delays attributable to denial operations, and build geospatial reconstructions from debris mapping and route interdictions. Such expansions would test the portability of the Bengkulu mechanisms and clarify how different mixes of leadership, logistics, and intermediary organizations shaped the balance between coercion and protection across Indonesia's revolutionary theaters.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Bengkulu's scorched-earth (*bumi hangus*) operations were a calibrated defensive repertoire rather than ad hoc destruction, translating Colonel Barlian's command intent into targeted bridge denial, administrative asset removal, and synchronized civilian movement to delay mechanized advance, deny administrative utility, and signal non-cooperation under severe resource constraints. By process-tracing decisions from leadership aims through engineering practice to immediate outcomes, and by mapping the connective role of intermediary civic organizations, the article reframes scorched-earth as a bounded coercion-and-protection assemblage embedded in local geographies, logistics, and institutional capacity. The principal contribution is twofold: analytically, it links intent, capability, and effect at provincial scale an underrepresented level in Indonesian revolutionary historiography and methodologically, it demonstrates how triangulating fragmentary archives, oral recollections, and negative cases can yield a transparent, replicable microhistory even where the visual record is thin. The findings invite a recalibration of decolonization narratives to include defensive signaling and infrastructure denial alongside more celebrated offensive actions, and they underline the need for targeted recovery of provincial documentary and visual sources to balance representational asymmetries. Limitations include the single-site scope, partial and sometimes propagandistic sources, and the absence of systematic engineering logs, all of which we mitigated but could not eliminate. Future research should extend comparative testing across coastal Sumatra provinces, integrate Dutch and Indonesian technical records to estimate delay effects, and build geospatial reconstructions that connect demolition sequencing, route interdiction, and civilian protection at scale.

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