1 Introduction: Beyond the League Table of Barbarity:

Comparing Extreme Violence during the Wars of Decolonization

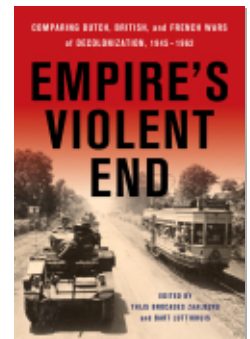➡ For additional information about this book

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond the League Table of Barbarity: Comparing Extreme Violence during the Wars of Decolonization

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Extreme violence by colonial security forces during wars of decolonization has become one of the most hotly debated historical topics since the turn of the century. Much has been written about iconic cases of abuse such as "la torture" by the French during the Algerian War (1954–1962) and "Britain's gulag" in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising (1952–1960). These painful legacies have attracted wide public attention as a result of the lawsuits filed by Kenyan victims against the British state and political gestures like President Emmanuel Macron's highly publicized acknowledgment in 2018 of systematic torture by French forces during the Algerian war.

Torture, executions, rape, and other forms of extreme violence during other wars of decolonization have also drawn varying levels of scholarly attention. The British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya (1948–1960) has traditionally featured prominently as the paradigmatic case of a less violent approach to colonial counterinsurgency. But even this supposed poster child of the "hearts and minds" approach has become subject to a revisionist take that draws attention to its more violent early period and coercive aspects throughout.[1] The First Indochina War (1945–1954) is well known for its intense combat operations, culminating in the surprising French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Yet atrocities by French security forces against the Vietnamese have remained largely outside the scholarly and public spotlights, which are still firmly locked on the Algerian war. Mainly owing to the late unraveling of the Portuguese African empire, research into extreme levels of violence during decolonization in Angola and Mozambique in the 1960s and early 1970s has been catching up only recently.

One particular war of decolonization that has created high levels of controversy on a national level in the past decade, but that has remained largely unknown internationally, is the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–1949), in which Dutch security forces committed many atrocities. When King Willem-Alexander apologized for "excessive violence on the part of the Dutch" in the late 1940s during his 2020 state visit to Indonesia, his gesture attracted a mere fraction of the international media attention received by Macron two years earlier.[2] The military aspects of the Dutch-Indonesian case—the very first in the long wave of post–Second World War decolonization wars—are also largely neglected by international scholars with an interest in the wars of decolonization. Even during the recent wave of attention for colonial counterinsurgency in the wake of the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—conflicts with arguably similar characteristics—the Dutch-Indonesian case was all but absent from publications and conferences.[3]

The surge of attention in the Netherlands for its own violent colonial endgame, a topic clearly dissonant with the predominantly benevolent Dutch collective self-image, was prompted by a series of civil court cases on behalf of Indonesian victims against the Dutch state. The first of these court cases was filed in 2008 and decided in favor of the claimants in 2011, when it first attracted broad public attention. Ever since, Dutch society and politics have been in a process of reevaluating these dark pages of their colonial past.[4] Parallel to resurgent public attention, historians have taken up the mantle of studying these atrocities. In his seminal 2016 book *De brandende kampongs van Generaal Spoor* (The burning villages of General Spoor), Rémy Limpach led the way and concluded that "Dutch troops left a trail of burning *kampongs* and piles of corpses throughout the Indonesian Archipelago." Despite numerous earlier revelations and short spikes of public attention over the preceding decades, successive Dutch governments had downplayed any atrocities committed by Dutch troops as merely isolated "excesses" in an otherwise properly conducted military campaign. This new study showed that extreme violence had in fact been structural in nature.[5] After the mounting pressure of the continuing court cases and the publication of Limpach's book, the Dutch government in late 2016 decided to finally provide financial support for a 2012 initiative by three Dutch historical institutes for an independent comprehensive research program.[6]

This book is the outcome of one of this broader research program's eight subprojects. While the other seven Dutch research teams focused specifically on various aspects of the Indonesian case, our project set out to broaden the scope of analysis to a comparison with other wars of decolonization. In doing so, we not only seek to bring the Dutch-Indonesian case to the attention of a wider international audience, but also to place it at the heart of a much-needed comparative

effort of juxtaposing extreme violence in Indonesia, Algeria, Indochina, Malaya, Kenya, and elsewhere. Throughout this book, therefore, the Dutch-Indonesian conflict runs as a thread that functions as a central case that also reveals new insights on these better-known cases.

The contributions to this book concentrate on escalations of violence by the colonizer's side of the respective conflicts. Even though local dynamics of violence, the often violent behavior of independence fighters and other armed groups, as well as victims' voices, feature centrally in some of the chapters (see the chapters by Frakking and Thomas, Asselin and Schulte Nordholt, Scagliola and Vince), the perspective of the different peoples on the receiving end of the colonial powers' violence—the victims—remains to be studied in more detail in future comparative research. Our focus on colonial transgressions also led us to exclude comparisons with both more peaceful transitions of power and the hasty British and Belgian withdrawals with extremely violent civil-war type aftermaths in India and Congo.

The starting point of our comparison, the Dutch-Indonesian case, perhaps requires some explanation for those less intimately familiar with its details. Two days after Japan's capitulation on 15 August 1945, the Indonesian Republican leaders Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta were the first in a wave of anticolonial nationalists to declare independence—to be followed two weeks later by Ho Chi Minh's proclamation of the independence of Vietnam. A violent anti-Dutch and internecine social revolutionary period coincided with the reappearance of Dutch authorities in the wake of the British occupying powers. The British initially militarily curtailed the Dutch and pressured them to negotiate with the Indonesian Republic. But after the Allied withdrawal, the gradual buildup of a 120,000-strong military force, and the breakdown of diplomacy, the Dutch government unleashed a first major military offensive in July 1947. They euphemistically labeled it a "police action" in order to signify to an international audience that this should be considered an internal affair. The aim of the offensive was to occupy the economically vital areas of Java and Sumatra. The operation was a success in conventional military terms, reclaiming large areas from the fledgling Indonesian Republic. However, the success was subsequently offset by a quite successful, yet costly, Indonesian guerrilla campaign.

US-dominated diplomatic intervention through the United Nations in this period initially favored the Dutch in their pursuit of a neocolonial federal construction within a Dutch-Indonesian Union—a model inspired on a French-Vietnamese agreement that was in the works simultaneously. But in the course of 1948, fears of communist insurgent success in Malaya and Vietnam at the time caused US policy makers (and in their wake other international actors) to switch sides, especially after they had become convinced that the nationalist Republic

FIGURE 1.1   During the partial Allied occupation of Java and Sumatra, British-Indian troops burn down houses in Bekasi on 13 December 1945. Large parts of the town were destroyed as a collective punishment for the brutal murder of five members of the Royal Air Force and twenty British-Indian riflemen whose Dakota aircraft crash-landed near the town. (Collection Netherlands Institute of Military History)

rather than the stubborn but weakening Dutch allies formed the best antidote against communism in Southeast Asia.[7] Ignoring the writing on the wall, the Netherlands nevertheless launched yet another major offensive in December 1948—the second "police action"—this time aimed at "decapitating" the Republic by conquering its capital and arresting its political and military leaders. This led to ever more intense guerrilla warfare, a similar faltering counterinsurgency campaign by the overstretched Dutch army, atrocities on all sides, and unprecedented international condemnation of the war-weary Dutch. All these factors together led to a speedy negotiated withdrawal in late 1949 and the formal transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949.

Indonesia thus became the first former colony in the post–Second World War era to gain independence through armed struggle, albeit in combination with successful diplomacy by its leaders. Several such struggles with varying levels of success would follow in Asia and Africa, with the last major decolonization

wars ending in 1975 when the Portuguese finally withdrew from their African colonies. In this book, we have somewhat shortened our temporal focus. As our emphasis is on the Dutch-British-French comparison, Algerian independence in 1962 forms the endpoint of the major conflicts that we focus on (even though minor British colonial counterinsurgencies such as that in Aden would stretch into the 1970s).

In this introductory chapter, we will first explain the added value of a comparative approach in studying the topic of extreme violence during wars of decolonization. In making the case for a balanced comparison, we briefly reflect on how comparisons have previously been used by contemporaries, journalists and historians, in often opportunistic ways. We then give a more detailed definition of what it is that we compare in this volume: "extreme violence." Subsequently, we provide some essential comparative context on political and military aspects of the wars of decolonization studied here, in order to pave the way for our main conclusions: our reflections on the causes for and nature of the violent transgressions taking place within them. Finally, we elaborate on how we compare by introducing the other seven chapters, before recapitulating the key analytical findings that emerged from the collaborative effort of writing this edited volume.

Why We Compare: Beyond Guilt Ranking

Despite the wave of scholarly, public, and sometimes judicial attention in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and other countries, debates on extreme forms of violence have mostly remained nationally self-centered, one might even say parochial. This has hampered scholars' ability to fully understand the dynamics behind the escalation of violence. That is not to say that broader comparisons have never been made. In general, the field of colonial and imperial history has a rich tradition of comparative studies.[8] The processes of decolonization have also been contrasted, but mostly with a focus on the level of policy, diplomacy, and strategy for the French and British cases, for example by scholars such as Martin Thomas and Martin Shipway.[9] Surprisingly, however, academic comparisons focusing on the use of violence remain very scarce.

This scholarly void has not stopped various actors in the public sphere from using more superficial, ad hoc comparisons for their own, often opportunistic, purposes. Contrasting national "styles" of military operations during decolonization was already common practice in colonial times. The British "minimum force" approach in Malaya was typically contrasted with heavy-handed French practices in Indochina even before the British way was presented as the "population-centric" antidote to a US "enemy-centric" attrition strategy in

Vietnam after 1965.[10] The Dutch were another case in point. As early as 1946 the army commander General Simon Spoor contrasted—quite selectively and favorably for his own troops, of course—his colonial army's "direct methods" to the indiscriminate firepower unleashed by none other than the British military during the height of the battle of Surabaya (November 1945) and elsewhere during their partial post–Second World War occupation of Java and Sumatra. Attorney General Henk Felderhof, a central figure in the minimal prosecution of atrocities and in the legitimization of extreme violence in Indonesia, made a similar comparison in 1948 shortly after the British Royal Air Force started bombing communist rebels in neighboring Malaya at the outset of the communist rebellion. Felderhof's self-serving motive was to validate the wave of executions led by the infamous Captain Raymond Westerling on South Sulawesi in late 1946 and early 1947—much in the way that the captain himself, in his memoirs, later legitimized his campaign of terror (see the chapter by Harmanny and Linn).

Comparison has also frequently been used in later years in the public debate to underline lingering notions of Dutch exceptionalism, until this very day. When war veteran Joop Hueting in 1969 revealed on national TV widespread Dutch atrocities in Indonesia, one of many hundreds of angry fellow veterans ranted in a protest letter to the editors, "Dutch soldiers don't do such things. Germans, French and Americans do those things . . . but Dutchmen certainly DO NOT."[11] However, if recent historiography has proven anything, it is that—on orders by or with the consent of their officers—a significant number of young Dutch men as well as locally recruited colonial forces did resort to methods reminiscent of those of the former German and Japanese occupiers.

No matter the obvious differences in scale and intent, it is surprising that quite many soldiers themselves made this very comparison in their personal writings, such as that of a soldier writing home claiming in December 1948 that he could name many examples proving "we are no better than the Hun." Several of them even equated Dutch actions that they had witnessed to the infamous and iconic Nazi punitive razzia on the town of Putten in September 1944 (the Dutch equivalent of Oradour-sur-Glane or Lidice).[12] Dutch servicemen and administrators were not alone in seeing parallels between their own conduct and Nazi practices. Eric Griffith-Jones, the British attorney general in Kenya, described in a 1957 memo the abuse of detainees in internment camps as "distressingly reminiscent of conditions in Nazi Germany or Communist Russia."[13] French servicemen also made frequent comparisons with Nazi violence in France, referring particularly to the Oradour massacre of recent memory, asking, for instance, "how many Oradours in Algeria?" Or to quote another soldier describing in his diary the fate of an Algerian village under French attack, "Oradour without a church, French soldiers and not SS. Everyone is expelled, houses are burnt to the ground."[14]

Many of the more recent comparisons of excessive violence during French, British, Dutch, and other colonial counterinsurgencies also tend toward exercises in "guilt ranking," usually resulting in an assessment that downplays one's own culpability. Not only contemporaries and journalists but also respected scholars have occasionally made attempts at comparison. Nevertheless, even the best of this sort, by Van Doorn and Hendrix, remained no more than "a first sketch," as the authors readily admitted in 1985.[15] One of the key objectives in many of these attempts has been to establish that even though "we" may have been worse than previously assumed, the Dutch military was not quite as bad as the French in Algeria, the Portuguese in Mozambique, or the Americans in Vietnam. The often superficial comparisons have had a detrimental effect on public debate in the Netherlands, where this excuse has continued to hold sway.[16] In the United Kingdom, there has been a similar tendency. In our project, we are not interested in drafting what David Anderson has rightly disparaged as a "league table of barbarity." Instead, we explore the question why in fact *all* these wars escalated to the extent that colonizers so regularly engaged in serious human rights violations, despite the political and military-strategic differences.[17] Why, as Martin Thomas has put it, did "recourse to extreme violence seem not only logical, but defensible, even ethically imperative, to those authorizing it and performing it"?[18]

What We Compare: Definitions and Forms of Abuse

At this point it is important to clarify our central concept: extreme violence in decolonization wars. We are primarily interested in transgressions of violence, the moments when violence crosses certain boundaries, be they legal, normative, or political. In the respective historiographies of the conflicts studied in this volume, various terms have been used to identify this subject, each with its own problems. British debates about colonial counterinsurgencies for a long time revolved around theories of "minimum force" versus practices of "excessive force" or "exemplary force."[19] Many authors also use vaguer and under-defined terms like "brutality" or "atrocities" to identify their subject. Another favorite phraseology to signal the same topic without having to get bogged down in questions of definition is to talk about decolonization wars (and counterinsurgency in general) as "dirty wars."[20]

In the historiography on the Dutch-Indonesian conflict the discussion about terminology has likewise been highly contentious. An important marker was set in 1969 with the publication of a government report known as the *Excessen- nota* (memorandum on excesses). This hastily drafted document purports to

give a survey (since proven to be highly incomplete) of "excesses" or incidents of "excessive violence" perpetrated by Dutch troops in the Indonesian war.[21] As its main author, Cees Fasseur, later admitted, the extralegal term "excesses" was chosen expressly by the Dutch government to avoid the use of "war crimes."[22] For decades these terms, with their euphemistic connotations, were largely uncritically adopted by Dutch historians. Only in the past decade has the usage started to shift. Some authors now prefer to speak of Dutch "war crimes" in Indonesia, irrespective of the difficult discussions about the applicability of the laws of war to the conflict.[23] The most commonly used term has recently become "extreme violence." However, these terms suffer from the same problem as all the previous ones: they are exceedingly difficult to define and demarcate.[24]

It is analytically problematic to treat transgressions of violence in isolation from violence in general. As we further illustrate below, extreme violence can also not be separated from the broader context of warfare—the type of war and its intensity—in which it takes place. Nevertheless, Stathis Kalyvas rightly warns us in his groundbreaking *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* that the study of violence needs to be analytically decoupled from war. After all, "a considerable amount of violence in civil wars lacks conventional military utility and does not take place on the battlefield." But Kalyvas also admits that violence cannot be properly explained without considering that a context of war crucially influences the forms and intensity of violence.[25] For instance, despite a recurrent belief over the past century in the effectiveness of the "hearts and minds" approach to counterinsurgency, it is hard to deny that few insurgencies have been successfully defeated without high levels of violence and coercive methods targeting the guerrillas' civilian support base.[26] However repulsive such measures may seem, these considerations have to be taken into account when explaining variations and parallels in the use of extreme violence against those striving for independence.

So where do we, for the purposes of this volume, draw the line between the transgressive violent acts at the heart of this study and "regular" violent acts of war that largely remain outside our scope? In essence, the authors in this book have converged around a commonsensical approach inspired by, but not solely focused on, the broad parameters of the human rights frameworks that were developed in the 1940s to 1960s. Important markers during the era of decolonization wars were the signing of the UN Human Rights Charter in December 1948, the emerging European Convention on Human Rights, signed in 1950, and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.[27] However, precisely because of the fact that this legal framework was emerging only at the time of the decolonization wars, and because colonial powers most often tried to ignore it by claiming that these were internal conflicts, we do not intend to get fully embroiled here in

the question of its applicability during the various conflicts under scrutiny. Others have done this to much greater effect.[28]

Instead, we take as an additional baseline to our commonsensical notion that, from the high command down to the level of the individual conscript or colonial soldier, individuals in most cases knew very well when they or their colleagues were crossing a boundary—for example when torturing, executing noncombatants, raping, pillaging, or razing entire villages. As elaborated above, many firsthand accounts in diaries by troops on the ground clearly establish this consciousness. As in official sources, these commentators often interpreted or legitimized such abuse as "a necessary evil," clearly implying their awareness of an ethical or legal line being crossed.

We do not mean to suggest that all violence during decolonization wars was "extreme," nor that decolonization wars necessarily saw more transgressions of violence than other wars. We are interested in the purpose, direction, and prevalence of some of the violence being used in the contexts of these wars. In our approach, a pivotal aspect making violence extreme—in other words, what made these wars "dirty"—is the deliberate targeting of those unable to defend themselves, be it noncombatant civilians or surrendered fighters as well as other unarmed suspects who have been taken prisoner.[29] Particularly in irregular warfare, delineating the former group—who is a civilian, and who is a guerrilla—is more complex than defining the latter category. Abuses that take place in captivity, such as torture, the execution of detainees, or rape and random sadistic acts (such as described in this volume by Scagliola and Vince), generally provide clearer examples of lines being crossed.

Extreme violence in the wars of decolonization took a range of forms. Targeting noncombatants encompasses not only inflicting well-known forms of bodily harm, but also the destruction of property and livelihood for nonmilitary purposes, such as (collective) revenge, intimidation, and punishment. Also included can be mass internment and the uprooting of whole communities in the context of population- and resources-control measures, such as in Kenya, Algeria, and Malaya (as mentioned in this volume in the contributions by Frakking and Thomas and Scagliola and Vince).[30] In each of these conflicts, hundreds of thousands of civilians suffered greatly as a result of these brutal and destabilizing but often strategically successful measures. Similar large-scale population-control was not used structurally by the Dutch in Indonesia. But a comparative perspective of strategic incentives makes one wonder whether the mass burning of houses and entire villages—which was a common practice in Indonesia—did not sometimes serve a similar resources-control function by denying insurgents a support base.[31]

What we quickly realized when comparing the historiographical literature on forms of violence is that the scholarly focus in relation to certain cases has often been driven by national obsessions, or what we call "iconic forms of extreme violence." Every former colonizing nation and every decolonization conflict seems to have acquired its own form of violence that is seen as the most striking expression of the conflict. For the French, this has been "la torture," the systemic use of torture in Algeria (as becomes clear in this volume in the epilogue by Raphaëlle Branche). For the British it is forced displacement and mass internment in what some have called "Britain's gulag" in Kenya, as well as the coercive "villagization" program in Malaya. For the Dutch case in Indonesia, so-called summary executions of noncombatants (especially those initiated by Raymond Westerling and his special forces on South Sulawesi) perform such a role of an icon of memory.[32]

Of course, certain forms of violence became iconic for the very obvious reason that they were very prevalent, very recognizable aspects of particular wars. Nevertheless, a more careful comparison shows—most clearly here in the contribution by Scagliola and Vince—that these icons of memory can also function as "black holes" absorbing most national scholarly attention, thus creating

FIGURE 1.2   French paratroopers question Omar Merouane, whom they suspect of having committed terrorist attacks in Algiers, on 14 March 1957. Systemic use of torture, or "la torture," has gained an iconic status in collective French memory of the Algerian war. (Jacques Grevin / AFP via Getty Images)

blind spots for other forms of violence. From our comparative work, we learned that in some cases the particular forms of violence became iconic not necessarily because of their prominence during the conflict. Other forms of violence were equally important but have not attracted the same level of attention in later debates. For instance, French torture has been heavily accentuated because it was systematic, but how much do we really know of the proliferation and scale of torture by Dutch security forces?[33] Similarly, can we really say that strategies of population and resources control had no functional equivalent in the Dutch campaign in Indonesia, as long as no one analyzes Dutch thinking and practices through this lens?

To be clear, these selective national memories have an obvious positive side: the fact that one particular violent phenomenon became iconic has consequently made these wars "memorable" in public consciousness. Simply put: if the Dutch public knows anything about atrocities in Indonesia it is probably *because* of Captain Westerling's mass executions, just as British and French audiences know about the decolonization violence because of the catchphrases "British gulag" and "la torture." By contrast, the French campaign in Indochina or British campaigns in Cyprus or Aden are much less known partly because of their lack of an iconic atrocity. But as we noticed, the iconic status of these forms of violence also has a more negative effect on memory and historiography. Iconic forms of violence tend to crowd out other forms of violence from our minds. As historians, we are as much a part of public debate as anyone else, and we can become afflicted by the same obsessions. Because collectively our research efforts have been focused heavily on certain forms of violence, we have not sufficiently researched other forms, leading to an unproductive confirmation bias that overly emphasizes national peculiarities ("national ways of war"). In this book, we highlight that these national obsessions are more a product of postwar narrative creation than a reflection of realities during the respective wars. In fact, we found that the forms of violence used in the wars studied here, as well as the causes for transgressions, were more closely comparable than a cursory reading of the various national historiographies would suggest.

Comparative Context: Decolonization, Warfare, and Atrocities

Before we can delve deeper into the causes and nature of extreme violence common to the wars we study in this volume, it is imperative that we introduce the most important cases within a broader analytical context. The many resemblances between the wars of decolonization notwithstanding, some general knowledge

is warranted on the important variations in political, social, economic, strategic, and military contexts in Indonesia, Algeria, Indochina, Malaya, and Kenya. After all, these factors explain some of the significant differences in the scale and intensity of the wartime violence employed, which in turn *may* help explain the transgressions taking place in each case.

For instance, the political stakes for the French in Algeria were always higher than elsewhere, as the French considered "l'Algérie française" an integral part of the Republic, consisting of two *departements.* Algeria harbored a European settler community of over one million, making up almost 13 percent of the population. This contrasts starkly even with Kenya, whose white settler community of 0.2 percent was considered large in relation to other British colonies and—as in the case of Algeria—has often been presented as an explanation for the colonial power's tenacity and the draconian and violent methods it employed.[34] The estimated three hundred thousand Europeans in the Indonesian archipelago, more than half of them Eurasian, made up over 0.4 percent of its inhabitants. When it comes to economic relevance, it is crucial to consider that the Dutch "Jewel in the Crown" made an even larger contribution to the metropole's gross national product than British India did to that of the United Kingdom. Moreover, being the nation's only major colony, it was regarded as essential to the Netherlands' geopolitical relevance.[35] This all helps to explain Dutch political stubbornness and—in spite of a strategic potential dwarfed by France and Britain—the massive military deployment in times of post–Second World War austerity.

Clearly, the scale and intensity of military confrontations were also related to the respective colonial powers' willingness—or lack thereof—to address the legitimate grievances of those supporting the armed insurgencies, or ultimately to provide outright independence. The colonial powers' ability to internally contain insurgencies also played a significant role. The British were clearly most successful in politically and strategically isolating the insurgencies they faced in their relatively small colonies of Malaya and Kenya. This was partly because these insurgencies originated in a distinct ethic group, but also—at least in Malaya—due to the comparatively more timely and generous British offers of a pathway to negotiated autonomy and ultimate independence. The French and Dutch (let alone the Portuguese) were much more hesitant.

Another factor at play was the level of international military and diplomatic involvement, with the former having an escalating and the latter a de-escalating effect. The lack of outside interference in the dismantling of the British Empire and in military support for the communist resistance contrasted sharply with the highly internationalized Indochina War, which saw massive material Chinese military support to the Vietminh and increasing US political and military backing for the French.[36] Like Malay and Kenyan insurgents and in contrast to the

Vietminh (as well as the Front de Libération Nationale insurgents in Algeria), Indonesian nationalists remained isolated from outside military support, partly owing to geographical circumstances. But in stark contrast to the British or the French wars, the conflict in Indonesia was fully internationalized on the diplomatic level through British, US, and United Nations interference. While many Dutch contemporaries blamed the eventual loss of their colony on this meddling, US diplomatic intervention in 1949 is particularly likely to have saved the Dutch and Indonesians from an even longer and more intense guerrilla war that was in the end unwinnable for the Dutch.[37]

Figures on the scale and intensity of combat and other forms of violence are telling but extremely hard to come by. Those readily available, such as the numbers of military personnel involved on the part of the colonial powers, need to be weighed carefully. For instance, with a peak military strength of 150,000 personnel in Indonesia in 1949, Dutch troop levels may have seemed impressive, particularly in relation to the metropole's population of nine million, but the number of "boots on the ground" remained low relative to the seventy million Indonesians they were trying to control. Indonesia's population amounted to eight times that of Algeria, over two and a half times that of Vietnam, and twelve times that of Malaya and Kenya.[38] In comparison, French peak troop strength amounted to 450,000 forces in Algeria and 220,000 French Union Forces in Indochina, while the British-led military presence in Malaya and Kenya peaked at approximately 40,000 and 12,000 Commonwealth troops respectively. The fact that France over the course of the entire Algerian war mobilized close to two million men and the Dutch "only" 220,000 can be explained by the extremely long and often extended tours of duty of Dutch troops, lasting up to three or even four years. The resulting psychological wear and tear and the overall shortage of Dutch forces—and thus lagging willingness to punish troops for transgressions or to relieve officers—have been highlighted by some historians as among the key explanations for extreme violence. However, a comparison with, for instance, the French in Algeria leaves it doubtful whether more troops and shorter rotations would have resulted in less abuse.

Figures on military casualties on the colonial powers' side are fairly reliable. Algeria and particularly Indochina saw heavier fighting than Indonesia, which is partly demonstrated by the 25,000 deadly French casualties and over 90,000 French Union Forces dead, respectively. The Dutch, by contrast, lost close to 5,000 servicemen in Indonesia, half of the losses combat related, with the other half attributable to disease, exhaustion, or accidents, a ratio that was probably similar in most contemporary colonial conflicts. Bringing into the equation the deadly military losses of 1,450 Commonwealth forces during the conflicts in Malaya and 167 in Kenya immediately shows the lower overall intensity of those wars.[39]

When it comes to the numbers of deadly casualties among Indonesians, Algerians, Vietnamese, Kenyans, and Malays, levels of uncertainty rise exponentially. Moreover, as shown by Christiaan Harinck's chapter in this volume, the distinction between combatant and noncombatant casualties is highly problematic in all statistics. The most reliable estimates indicate that over 300,000 Vietnamese died during the nine-year Indochina War on all sides, including civilians. For Malaya, the official number of insurgents killed is 6,711. The estimated number of Kenyans killed at the hand of security personnel in British service ranges from the official figure of 11,503 to approximately 20,000, with some scholars even suggesting a multiple of that number. In Algeria, up to 300,000 Algerians died as a direct result of the war. Meanwhile, official Dutch figures say some 100,000 Indonesians died as a result of combat actions. A high ratio of noncombatant casualties might explain the massive asymmetry between Dutch and Indonesian victims. Moreover, certainly for the Dutch-Indonesian case and possibly for some of the others, these casualty figures represent the lower limit of the actual number of deaths.[40] In the end, establishing casualty figures is also highly dependent on whether we decide to focus on the anticolonial struggle or if we also include the civil war and fratricide often entangled in these wars.

Reliable statistics on atrocities and war crimes—figures that would be crucial to this study—are even harder to come by. A rare source is an internal French report of 1955 disclosing that over nine thousand Vietnamese war prisoners were executed, with a peak occurring in 1952–1953. The vast majority of the bodies were never recovered.[41] One of the few figures on victims of Dutch atrocities is provided by the iconic and thus relatively well-researched case of Dutch mass executions in South Sulawesi, which resulted in at least thirty-five hundred victims, mostly noncombatant suspects, in a three-month period (see the chapter by Asselin and Schulte Nordholt).[42] The vast majority of the incidents involving the murder of captives, or other forms of atrocities, are much harder to trace and reconstruct, as they took place during regular patrols and actions ("sweeps"). They went unreported and were at best marked as "prisoner shot while fleeing" in archival records.

The space and context in which violence and coercion took place thus largely determine the availability of sources and figures, as Scagliola and Vince, in their chapter, also highlight in relation to sexual violence. Somewhat more reliable figures are also available on the hundreds of thousands of Algerians, Kenyan, and Malay-Chinese civilians who were forcibly relocated and thus administered by the colonial powers. Again, no organized equivalent existed in Indonesia, but we do know that at the conflict's height tens of thousands of Indonesians were being held in makeshift Dutch prisoner of war camps.[43]

To conclude this contextual sketch, we want to emphasize the significant variations in intensity and scale of warfare between the conflicts studied most thoroughly in this book—with Indochina on one end of the scale and Kenya on the other. But it is altogether less clear how these differences affected the scale and nature of the excessive force being deployed. The intensity of combat was certainly not *necessarily* related to the use of extremely violent methods. It is striking how violence against noncombatants was used in all these conflicts (and on all sides, of course). So in spite of the relatively small and localized character of the insurgencies faced by British authorities, their methods were often viciously coercive. Particularly Kenya stands out for low combat intensity combined with high levels of violence. The Dutch case is also telling in this regard. The international involvement as well as the Netherlands' limited strategic potential restrained the Dutch militarily, resulting in peaks and lows in combat activity between 1945 and 1949. Yet despite the relatively short periods of months rather than years of truly intense guerrilla and counterguerrilla operations, the structural nature of the atrocities committed on all sides of the conflict is evident. Clearly, there are many other variables at work.

Causes and Nature of Extreme Violence

That brings us back to asking the "why" question: why did colonizers in all our cases resort to extreme forms of violence? This means that we have to further explore the causes and nature of the violence employed by the respective colonial security forces. As there is rarely a single cause or motive that sufficiently explains excessive levels of force used against noncombatants, our research led us to the conclusion that we have to think in terms of a causal hierarchy. Transgressions of violence are invariably the result of several, mutually reinforcing factors.[44] However, rather than merely listing these variables, we aim to weigh the relative importance of, on the one hand, specific causes for extreme violence such as failing leadership, lack of oversight and legal clarity, inexperience, psychological wear and tear on troops, individual psychology, and specific incidents triggering a "spiral of violence"; and, on the other hand, explanations emerging from more structural factors such as colonial legacies and cultures of violence, the nature of irregular warfare in general, and the legacy and brutalizing effect of the recent world war and long military deployments in the various colonies.[45]

Weighing and linking contributing factors by comparing different contexts opens up the opportunity to further the classic question whether the extreme violence of decolonization wars was an "unfortunate by-product" of combat or

rather a deliberate strategy. In other words, was extreme violence during the wars of decolonization the product of the inability to restrain at least theoretically undesired extreme violence, and thus the result of inadequate leadership? Or was it the result of conscious decisions that the use of "exemplary force" was the most effective and sensible strategy? These questions have long dogged debates about violence in decolonization wars, including the Dutch debate. In the latter, Rémy Limpach most recently introduced the compromise solution that the bulk of extreme violence used by Dutch forces in Indonesia was "structural" but not "systematic."[46] What he meant by "structural" was that the strategy chosen by the Dutch leadership made extreme violence unavoidable and widespread, but that (except in a number of specific contexts) the use of extreme violence was not explicitly mandated. However, Bennett and Romijn's comparison here of processes of political accountability for violence suggests that even this solution may warrant further complication. Their study forces us to conclude that the system that facilitated the use (and continuation) of extreme violence was maintained with more conscious forethought than the formula of "structural but not systematic" perhaps suggests.

The chapters in this volume provide new insights that help start the work of better understanding, distinguishing, and categorizing structural and situational causes of extreme violence. What were the relations between the various causal factors identified by previous historians?[47] Were all causes that we have identified also necessary causes? Can we point out a certain pivotal driver throughout the cases of decolonization wars studied in this volume, or might we even generalize about a causal linchpin? These chapters force us to ask critical questions where assumptions—also our own—have tended to dominate.

Our conclusion from this exploration of causal hierarchies of violence is that one of the most crucial, and so far underappreciated, factors determining extremely violent behavior is *impunity*: the compound effect of a lack of governmental, media, and judicial oversight and lack of legal clarity. Notions of impunity are a thread through most of the chapters in this volume: from institutionalized avoidance of accountability on the political level (Bennett and Romijn), to institutionalized indifference on the level of military tactics (Harinck), to personalized impunity for perpetrators of rape and other abuses (Scagliola and Vince), to even a lack of retrospective reputational accountability in the various national memory cultures (Branche). Impunity emerged as the spider in the causal web binding many of the abovementioned factors together. For example, impunity exacerbates the brutalizing consequences of exposure to violent circumstances and overall psychological wear and tear on troops. Impunity also ties in with more structural factors such as the colonial system in which the white man was virtually untouchable. And impunity may also correlate with the nature

of irregular warfare or counterinsurgency, which requires a high degree of dispersal of troops even down to platoon level—and thus lack of oversight. In sum, an institutionalized system of impunity at the tactical level, together with an often conscious lack of accountability at the strategic and political level, is something we can identify in all of the cases studied in this book, and seems to have been a linchpin connecting many other causal factors.

Our comparative exploration of structural causes of extreme violence also speaks to the broader academic debate on the nature of colonial violence, or, in our case, the nature of decolonization violence. In literature on colonial warfare, "colonial violence" often emerges as a distinct category. Dierk Walter, for instance, in his book *Colonial Violence*, speaks of the "conspicuous brutality" of colonial warfare and emphasizes that despite the relatively limited and irregular nature of combat in many colonial wars, colonial armies used "more brutal tactics" than their counterparts in "large-scale wars in the West." This argument builds on the premise that in a colonial environment, with Western powers fighting against a racially distinct enemy and a population deprived of equal rights, constraints were fewer and the ethical threshold for using force and coercion much lower than in "regular" theaters of war.[48] The fact that indigenous enemies often made the strategic choice to opt for guerrilla tactics reinforced this tendency, as contemporary Westerners often viewed this type of warfare as "uncivilized" or "savage." Some historians have also argued that colonial warfare and colonial policing were particularly brutal because the often fragile colonial regimes, colonial armies, and colonial societies were living in a constant state of fear: fear of their surroundings, fear of their colonial subjects, and fear for the potential of violent insurrection. As Kim Wagner (among others) has argued, this anxiety all too easily incentivized colonizers to use "exemplary force" through collective punishment or highly publicized executions as a key distinguishing feature of colonial violence.[49]

Should we then trace the regular occurrence of extreme violence during decolonization back to colonial cultural legacies, traditions, and mind-sets, as Dutch historians have also been inclined to do?[50] Were Western militaries in a colonial context more brutal than those fighting Europe'ws other twentieth-century wars? Because of the setup of our research, in which we have made thematically focused comparisons of various decolonization wars but not compared extensively with other wars, we cannot make definitive interventions in this debate. But as Clausewitz already observed, wartime use of force has an inherent tendency to escalate, though in different ways and to different degrees, depending on the constraints of the specific context.[51] In other words, the fact that violence escalates during warfare is not in itself noteworthy. But the explanations for why and how wartime violence transgresses are vital, which is precisely what this volume aims to provide.

Admittedly, our gut feeling tells us that the long-established practices of colonial racism, the denial of rights, white man's impunity, and the ever-present tendency to dehumanize the enemy played a role in making colonial forces particularly brutal. However, especially the contributions by Harmanny and Linn, and by Frakking and Thomas, do at least suggest that "colonial violence" is a highly problematic category. For one thing, as Frakking and Thomas argue, decolonization wars were generally experienced as something closer to civil war for many of the rural and urban communities among which they were fought, thus further erasing the difference with other twentieth-century conflicts. For another, the practice of culturally othering and dehumanizing the enemy has shaped patterns of violence in warfare on a much broader scale than just in colonial wars—a trend that goes back to early modern times, or even before.[52] It remains an open question whether the "othering" in colonial warfare is of a different nature than the "othering" occurring in all other wars, just as it remains a question whether colonial occupiers lived in a different state of anxiety for their surroundings than did any other military occupiers or authoritarian regimes.

Ultimately, to be able to answer these important, highly complex, and politically charged questions, we need to compare decolonization violence not only to "regular" combat operations in the context of interstate and intrastate warfare, but also to irregular warfare in a noncolonial setting. Harmanny and Linn in this volume set precisely such an agenda by comparing the war in Indonesia, for example, with the Greek Civil War and with the Korean War. One may further wonder about German abuse toward French civilians in a response to irregular *franc tireurs* in 1871 or about the so-called Rape of Belgium in 1914, let alone about massive abuse during the Second World War on the Eastern Front. As Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer argued in their study of German military experience, *Soldaten*, "the rigor with which German occupiers pursued alleged partisans was one reason that 60 percent of the casualties of World War II, an unprecedented proportion, were civilians."[53]

All this triggers the question whether the dominant driver for abuse was the nature of the colonial system—of which these wars were an extension—or rather the nature of irregular warfare with its inherently blurry lines between combatants and noncombatants (as both Frakking and Thomas and Harinck argue here). But even if irregular warfare is presumably by definition more "dirty" than conventional warfare, how should we evaluate the deliberate terrorization of populaces during the Second World War by strategic aerial bombardments on all sides? And what about the acceptance by the Western Allies of noncombatant casualties—including many thousands of French, Belgian, Dutch, and other allied civilians—in order to defeat Nazism? In what ways was the partially deliberate targeting of the enemy's civilian population for psychological effect in the

age of "total warfare" different from collectively punishing sections of the Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Algerian rural populations through terror and destruction? Were these methods not also aimed at driving a wedge between them and the irregular fighters they were suspected to support?

Based on our extensive exploration of violence during decolonization conflicts we can still not answer these questions definitively. But at least it is our hypothesis that the notion of "colonial violence" as a sui generis category directly related to "colonial warfare" may obscure more than it enlightens. First of all, the violence taking place within a colonial war is not automatically or necessarily colonial violence. Automatically assuming that all violence in colonial war is also "colonial violence" leads to a tendency to assume that the origin or cause *must* also be "colonial."[54] Second, it is already hard enough in itself—probably impossible—to delineate colonial warfare analytically from other armed conflict related to foreign occupation. We certainly do not want to go down the road of stretching the concept of "colonial occupation" to the extent that it loses all explanatory power. Overall, then, we would hypothesize that colonial violence may need to be "de-exceptionalized."

How We Compare

Having placed our central topic of extreme violence in the somewhat broader frame of both decolonization conflicts and warfare in a noncolonial context, we can now elaborate on how we will compare our different cases. Because of the explorative character of our project, the book consists of focused and richly descriptive studies rather than bird's-eye comparisons with high levels of generics and statistics. We have opted to delve deeply into a small number of colonial conflicts, relating each of them back to the relatively unknown but highly instructive Dutch-Indonesian case. The selection of cases and themes of the individual chapters was determined by the availability of expertise and sources relevant to them, but also their contribution to the book's two central questions: why colonial powers used extreme violence and how we can characterize the violence we observe.

The first couple of chapters in this volume delve straight into the question we raised earlier: why resorting to excessive forms of force seemed inescapable, logical, and defensible to those perpetrating, ordering, or condoning it in all the decolonization wars studied here. Chapter 2, by Huw Bennett and Peter Romijn, focuses on the highest of political levels. They investigate processes of political accountability and impunity, comparing the ways in which policy makers dealt with—or did not deal with—information about atrocities in their colonies. The

FIGURE 1.3   Dutch troops pose with a captured mortar crew of the Indonesian Republic Army (TNI) in Central Java during the second major Dutch offensive, December 21, 1948. (Collection Netherlands Institute of Military History)

respective Dutch and British processes of denial, deflecting responsibility, and neutralizing scandals, while organized in different ways, had surprisingly similar outcomes in terms of institutionalizing impunity and thus condoning violence. Thus, while contemporary explanations for extreme violence preferred to place the blame on the aberrant behavior of individuals, a closer study of the evidence concerning what was known at the time and how that knowledge was processed points toward more systemic and structural causes.

By contrast to Bennett and Romijn's investigation of high politics, Roel Frakking and Martin Thomas in chapter 3 divert our attention in the exact opposite direction. They examine local microdynamics of violence in a broad-ranging comparison encompassing five cases. It was in the nature of decolonization wars that levels and forms of violence varied enormously between different areas even within the same conflict. Frakking and Thomas observe that targeting of noncombatants was especially rife in highly contested areas—what they call "interior borderlands." If we are to understand who used violence against whom and why, we cannot assume fixed or immutable affiliations. Supposedly fixed categories demarcating those who supported or opposed the warring parties, those who were colonizers and those who were colonized, anticolonial struggle and civil

war, and those who were combatants or noncombatants, were in fact malleable and locally determined. This leads to an argument for de-exceptionalization.

The next two chapters take a closer look at the dynamics and contexts of violence in respective colonies by way of detailed symmetric comparisons. Chapter 4, by Pierre Asselin and Henk Schulte Nordholt, studies the period in 1945–1946 of early revolutionary violence and its suppression by comparing the Dutch-Indonesian confrontation with the emerging First Indochina War. In both former colonies, the sudden surrender of the Japanese on 15 August 1945 created a power vacuum that neither the British occupation forces and the returning Dutch and French, nor their Indonesian and Vietnamese adversaries, could initially fill. Asselin and Schulte Nordholt speak of a period of statelessness, which caused a chaotic contestation for power in which extreme violence emerged as a tool to assert control that (in the minds of all parties in the conflict) could not otherwise be attained. While these and other parallels between the two conflicts are striking, the processes showed obvious differences. These were caused partly by the Vietnamese communist insurgents already being much better organized than their Indonesian counterpart, partly by a radically different international context, and partly by differences in the strategic potential of the French and the Dutch, which resulted in variations in the degree to which extreme violence was directed top-down or initiated at the lower levels of command.

The second of these symmetric comparisons is Stef Scagliola and Natalya Vince's contribution on rape in the French-Algerian and Dutch-Indonesian Wars (chapter 5). Rape in wartime, they argue, is over-theorized but empirically under-studied. They compare and analyze the specific places and contexts in which soldiers raped, and delve into their motivations. Scagliola and Vince also explore the different ways in which rape in wartime has been politicized: discourses of rape are almost absent in the Indonesian case but dominate the narrative on the Algerian war. They ask the question to what extent the differing prominence of memories of rape can be explained by the different spaces—close to or far from the battlefield—in which abuse took place and the consequences this had for the victims' chances of redress.

The next two chapters further investigate the *nature* of violence during decolonization, both in their own way continuing the argument that these wars and their forms of violence should be de-exceptionalized. Chapter 6, by Azarja Harmanny and Brian McAllister Linn, deals with the notion of "technical violence." This term is current only among Dutch scholars of decolonization, and is used to refer to the employment of heavy weapons such as artillery and airpower. Among these Dutch scholars, "technical violence" is often considered almost inherently extreme. Moreover, they often suggest that the use of these weapons systems can be blamed for the majority of noncombatant victims.

By treating the Dutch case asymmetrically in the context of other wars—both colonial and other types of warfare—Harmanny and Linn critically assess both the ill-defined concept of "technical violence" and the sweeping assumptions about casualties, as well as the suggestion by contemporary counterinsurgents—inadvertently echoed by some scholars—that "direct" infantry methods were more selective and less deadly. Underlying all this is their analysis that, if anything, the use of heavy weapons in decolonization wars was in line with the broader nature of Western warfare in the mid–twentieth century.

Christiaan Harinck in chapter 7 is likewise interested in how the violence of decolonization wars fits in with wider contemporary Western military thinking. Harinck's broad comparative overview zooms in on the complex issue of noncombatant casualties. Based on a short survey of the available statistics, incomplete and unreliable though they may be, Harinck concludes that it is at least clear that in all decolonization wars casualties on the insurgent side far outnumbered casualties on the side of the colonizer. Also clear is that a significant share of those casualties were noncombatants. Harinck searches for explanations, first in the predominant military thinking of the time: impunity reigned because through most of the twentieth century Western militaries did not prioritize avoiding noncombatant casualties. Second, he points at the weapons on which colonial armies at the time relied for counterinsurgency: what he calls "weapons of collateral damage"—both the type of heavy weapons that Harmanny and Linn also address, and heavy infantry weapons such as machine guns and portable mortars. With this explanation and broader definition, Harinck deviates somewhat from the argument made by his colleagues in the previous chapter, in a sense representing precisely the predominant view in Dutch historiography that Harmanny and Linn critically examine.

This book is rounded out with chapter 8, by Raphaëlle Branche, who compares the political uses, afterlives, and memories of extreme violence during the wars of decolonization waged by France, the Netherlands, and Britain. All these three former imperial nations have struggled for decades with the uncomfortable place that these histories occupied in their respective collective memories. Each has gone through a long process, mostly separate from each other, but nevertheless with surprising similar steps. Branche traces the steps, from early narratives of success, through denial and defensive narratives, to recent hesitant and controversial attempts at reparation. She concludes that the recent past suggests we might be coming toward the end of a cycle of silencing and entering a new phase in which states have started recognizing at least a portion of their responsibility in the violence of the wars of decolonization. One could say that this volume is a symptom of that new phase.

The wars at the heart of this comparative study clearly show substantial variation in scale, intensity, purpose, and the methods employed. When we started this research, we received plenty of warnings not to compare apples with oranges. This saying has always struck us as confusing. Apples and oranges have much more in common than what sets them apart—they are both fruits, they are healthy, and full of vitamins and fiber. Similarly, while comparing the transgressions of violence in the context of decolonization, our research team quickly noticed that beneath the different surfaces, there was much more that united than divided our cases. This led to our first more general conclusion emerging from the series of thematically and methodologically rather diverse case studies: the need to de-exceptionalize. In a sense, every colonizer was attempting to square the same circle, each with its own tools: how to win a war among a population that most often did not see them as legitimate rulers. All the attractive words about restoring peace and order, winning heart and minds, and selective use of force could not hide that ultimately insurgencies could not be defeated by fighting armed opponents and persuasion alone. It always required forcing large swaths of the population into submission with the use of punitive and exemplary force and coercive methods against noncombatants.

The fact that the many commonalities surprised us somewhat could be interpreted as an indictment against the various national historiographies. Studies of extreme violence in the wars of decolonization from national perspectives have resulted in groundbreaking histories that have formed indispensable building blocks for our work here. Yet the isolation in which these various conflicts have often been studied has nevertheless led to a tendency in the literature to over-emphasize national peculiarities and particular causes or forms of abuse. This observation leads us to our second conclusion. Our comparison shows that the notoriety of supposedly peculiar national forms of violence—the "iconic atrocities" such as "la torture" in Algeria, "Britain's gulag" in Kenya, or the summary executions of Westerling's troops in Indonesia—is partly the product of later historiographical obsessions, and less an actual reflection of their prominence in the respective sources. This iconic status of certain forms of violence has had the negative effect on memory and historiography that other forms of violence have been crowded out from our collective minds. Because much of historians' collective research efforts has gone into exploring certain forms of violence, they have insufficiently researched other forms, leading to a sort of confirmation bias.

Our third conclusion from our comparative explorations is concerned with the causes of extreme violence in decolonization wars: why does violence in all these wars escalate to this extent, and why did resorting to excessive forms of force seem inescapable, logical, and defensible to those perpetrating, ordering,

or condoning it in all these wars? As elaborated above, previous historians have come up with a range of causal factors. Our contribution to those studies is, for one, that it is high time to put to bed the discussion whether occurrences of extreme violence in these wars were merely incidental "excesses" or rather of a structural nature. The fact that violent practices in all these wars escalated in similar ways, if in sometimes differing intensities, shows definitively that there are structural factors behind the escalation: from factors to do with the asymmetrical nature of the conflicts, to legacies of the Second World War and wider Western thinking about proper ways of war, to longer-established cultures of violence. Second, and most importantly, our contribution to discussions about the nature and causes of extreme violence is that among that spectrum of contributing causal factors, one stands out as a causal linchpin: the lack of accountability and thus the institutionalized impunity for extreme violence that was a common denominator throughout the conflicts studied in this forum. It is the glue that binds most of the other important causal factors together.

These conclusions are not only relevant to our own small circle of historians doing research on wars of decolonization. All those interested need to realize that what we are coming to terms with is not merely a Dutch, French, or British, but a common Western or at least European predicament. As shown in Raphaëlle Branche's final chapter to this book, an effort to compare should also inform the ongoing public use of history in our respective societies, the collective-memory battles and public reckoning related to these troubled pages of Western history. That is not to judge whether one form of coming to terms with the past is "better" than the other. But at least it might be possible to learn from each other, instead of pointing out the splinter in the other's eye while ignoring the beam in our own.