IV.

CLOSING REMARKS
iv. closing remarks

Conclusions

On 17 August 1945, two days after the Japanese surrender that brought an end to the Second World War in Asia, Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared Indonesia an independent state. This step was not recognized by the Netherlands, because the latter considered itself to be the legitimate authority and wanted to retain control over Indonesia's future. Indonesia thus had to be brought back under control. In the wake of British and Australian troops, the first Dutch military personnel and officials arrived in Indonesia to prepare for the return of colonial rule, followed by larger troop dispatches. The clashing ambitions of the Netherlands and the Republic led to four years of bitter conflict and tough negotiations, with many casualties, especially on the Indonesian side. In recent decades, there have been increasing and stronger indications that the Dutch armed forces used extreme violence in their operations, on a larger scale than was officially admitted by the Dutch either at the time or later.

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were high numbers of dead and wounded, as well as all the devastation and misery brought by a protracted war, the extent of which is difficult to determine. It is impossible to give precise figures for the number of Indonesian casualties as a result of Dutch military action. It has long been assumed that 100,000 died, but this figure cannot be substantiated with accuracy. According to Dutch sources, however, there were at least 46,000 casualties during and in the seven months following the second Dutch offensive, Operation Kraai, alone. We also know that the casualty ratio in the fighting between the Netherlands and the Republic was generally extremely unequal. The fact that many Indonesian civilians as well as fighters were killed can be inferred from the sources, which, though numerous, are fragmentary and incomplete, as well as from the many memorial plaques, burial fields and monuments to the victims of the War of Independence in villages and towns throughout the country. Finally, demographic calculations for the period 1940-1950 suggest excess mortality in the millions, although it is not clear what proportion of the deaths should be attributed to military violence. By contrast, the number of victims on the Dutch side can be established fairly accurately, both in terms of the number of soldiers who died in the war and the Europeans, Indo-Europeans and Moluccans, as well as Indonesians in Dutch service, who died as a result of the violence in the first phase of the Indonesian Revolution, known in the Netherlands as the ‘bersiap period’.

The desire for greater clarity about this history of war and violence ultimately led to this research programme. The primary aim of the research was to provide a more detailed analysis of and explanation for the nature of the Dutch military action in Indonesia in the years 1945-1949, paying ample attention to the historical, political and international context, as well as to the political and social aftermath of the war. More specifically, the programme focused on the use of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces and its consequences, and the extent to which political and legal responsibility was taken for this extreme violence both at the time and later. These questions formed the basis for the selection of the various sub-projects, the key findings of which are summarized in the preceding chapters.

In the introductory section of this book, it was explained that when designating or describing different forms of violence, we would use concrete terms wherever possible. Generalized and loaded terms such as ‘inordinate’, ‘excessive’, ‘illegitimate’ and ‘disproportionate’ violence, and also ‘war crimes’, would only be used when accompanied by further explanation. This choice
– the result of lengthy and intensive discussions between the researchers involved – stemmed from an awareness that, whilst they convey an intuitive sense of unacceptability, these terms are far from unambiguous because they can be associated with a wide range of legal, political and moral norms, some of which are enshrined in national and international laws and treaties, which in turn were and are subject to various interpretations. The latter point was an important reason to avoid legal considerations; yet, as explained in the introductory chapter, there is much to be said for the claim that the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law were applicable during the Indonesian War of Independence, or at least were deemed so, including by the colonial authorities themselves, and that the actions of the Dutch armed forces could and can be measured against these rules.

In this programme, the term ‘extreme violence’ functions as an overarching concept, as an indication of violence that was mostly used outside or at the margins of direct, regular combat situations. This violence was directed against civilians or against servicemen or fighters who had been disarmed after their capture or surrender, and usually occurred in the absence of direct military necessity or without a clearly defined military objective. Such violence could take all kinds of forms, such as torture, executions without trial, abuse, rape, looting, violent reprisals such as burning down kampongs or shooting civilians, or mass detention. Extreme violence also occurred within regular combat operations. For example, it could involve the use of heavy, but also light weaponry, whereby the risk of civilian casualties was ignored or taken for granted, or battles or operations in which soldiers fired at attackers more intensively and for longer than necessary. The primary function of the concept of ‘extreme violence’ is thus to describe the mode of warfare, but it also creates possibilities for considering the impact of the violence on the victims, and the political and moral aspects – however difficult they may be to define – of this violence. After all, these forms of violence contravened everything that contemporary Dutch political and military leaders claimed to stand for, certainly to the outside world, and they clashed with widely held moral values, not infrequently those of the perpetrators themselves. A number of the sub-projects reveal how fluid the different forms of violence were, and the extent to which the use of extreme violence was bound up with the nature of the war, the chosen strategy, and the dynamics of the violence.

As explained in the third introductory chapter in this book, the existing historical literature identifies a considerable number of factors that contrib-
uted to the large-scale use of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces: an unrealistic and therefore risky strategy with insufficient resources, based on an underestimation of and contempt for the adversary, which lowered the threshold for extreme violence; the often indifferent and opportunistic attitude of the political and the civilian and military judicial authorities, which facilitated a practice of secrecy and impunity; the quality and the prevailing culture of the armed forces, in terms of inadequate leadership at various levels, inexperience, an overly one-sided focus on conventional warfare, and insufficient education, training, communication and discipline; the inadequate, opportunistic and sometimes irresponsible selection of troops and auxiliaries; and continuity in the harsh administrative and military traditions rooted in colonial prestige, passed on via the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) to the Royal Netherlands Army (KL) and the Marine Brigade.

This research programme built on these insights, focusing – as explained above – on a more detailed analysis and explanation of the Dutch military action, specifically the use of extreme violence and its consequences, and the extent to which political and legal authorities took responsibility for the violence. This concluding chapter sets out the key findings of the various sub-projects with regard to several central themes, followed by some general observations in relation to the main questions addressed by the programme.

**Perspectives**

Although the leading questions addressed by this research programme stemmed from Dutch scholarly and social debates and most of the projects were conducted by Dutch historians, the programme also aimed to create a history that captured multiple voices, based on the rich variety of perspectives in the Netherlands and Indonesia. Among other things, this ambition was reflected in the joint discussions between Dutch and Indonesian researchers on the use – or the avoidance – of specific terms and concepts, for these are closely linked to perspectives, as explained in the first chapter of this book. Furthermore, an attempt was made – with varying success, certainly when it came to Indonesian voices – to allow the different perspectives to resonate in every part of the research, in the selection of sources, themes and views.

Two projects were explicitly devoted to this attempt to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives: Regional Studies and Witnesses & Contemporaries. Although both were based on collaboration with Indonesian his-
torians, they otherwise differed greatly in design. The collaborative project Regional Studies focused on historical research into local and regional developments in Indonesia at the time of the War of Independence, based on a number of connecting themes. Witnesses & Contemporaries functioned as a ‘front office’ to which people could bring their stories, suggestions and experiences relating to the War of Independence. By gathering personal stories, the project, which worked with the other sub-projects in several ways and at different times, highlighted the great variety of experiences and memories in both the Netherlands and Indonesia. In doing so, Witnesses & Contemporaries emphasizes the human dimension of the story: how people experienced the events, and how they processed and continue to process them in both personal and collective memories and the culture of remembrance. The focus on micro-histories reveals the continuum of violence and individual perceptions of violence, as well as showing how positions and loyalties are subject to change in constantly shifting contexts. The outcome is a kaleidoscope of experiences and emotions, sometimes strikingly similar, more often very different or even contradictory, not only to each other, but often also to prevailing images in history.

**Regional studies: revolutionary worlds**

One important aim of the programme was to situate the actions of the Dutch armed forces during the Indonesian War of Independence in their historical, political and international context; and that context was primarily formed by the revolutionary developments in Indonesia.

The image of a single war against the Republic and its army has persisted in the Netherlands, but the reality was much more complicated. Not only were many other armed groups involved in the conflict with the Dutch, but the Indonesian Revolution was a multiform phenomenon in which political, religious, social and regional conflicts were fought out, sometimes armed, sometimes in parallel to or as part of the war with the Netherlands. These developments are best studied at the local and regional levels, as this also opens up other perspectives on movements, communities and individual citizens with their own ideals and fears, in situations where strategic and sometimes also existential choices were unavoidable. The key terms in this analysis are legitimacy, violence and loyalty.

The *Proklamasi* gave the process of Indonesian state and nation-building a concrete form – the Republic. This has always been emphasized in the collective memory and in the politics of remembrance. Nevertheless, there was
no single revolution, not least because no one really understood or could foresee the end point that lay ahead. There were grand and stirring ambitions that were consonant with the pre-war desire to achieve full independence for Indonesia. There was also the complex everyday reality, in which some people – simply in order to survive – adopted various small, sometimes even personal ideals that together added up to form ‘the’ revolution.

In order to further our understanding of the dynamics of violence, it is important to consider the function of violence, and thus its fluidity and ambiguity. First, taking this approach contradicts the assumption that Indonesians, Chinese, Dutch, Indo-Europeans and others were exclusively either victims or perpetrators; these categories were often muddled. Moreover, approaching violence in terms of functionality also reveals what was achieved by exposing civilians to violence: it was used to force civilians to grant their support to either various Indonesian or Dutch troops. Everyday violence in addition became a ‘meaningful’ way for civilians – and fighters – to ensure their own safety. But of course, violence could also be dysfunctional and there were also other ways to win over the population.

Non-fighting individuals and communities also formed part of these revolutionary worlds. They often found themselves at the end of the chain of violence, and thus rapidly became the victims of mutually exclusive parties that were fighting for power and legitimacy. The perpetrators included Dutch soldiers, Indonesians and Chinese fighting under the Dutch flag, but also militant youths (pemuda), soldiers from the Republican army and, for example, communist and Islamic armed groups. Violence was a means to bind local or regional communities – Indonesians, Chinese, Indo-Europeans – to a particular programme and force them to grant their loyalty and support, thereby undermining the position of other parties.

State-building was not only a goal, but also a weapon in the conflict. The idea was that if a single authority could rule over the population and thus gradually acquire legitimacy, another authority would be unable to do so – and would lose its grip on the population or fail to become established at all. This conclusion also relates to the federalization of Indonesia initiated by the Dutch administration – the division of Indonesia into autonomous federal states, each with their own government. The federal state of East Indonesia (Negara Indonesia Timur) was formed by the Netherlands in this context, as well as smaller autonomous regions (daerah) on Sumatra and in West and East Java. The Republic, viewed by the Dutch as one of the intended federal states, opposed this form of state-building. The Republican interpretation
of sovereignty envisaged a unitary state under Indonesian leadership, with authority over the whole of Indonesia. The Republic was thus not prepared to allow other forms of authority to compete with its own, and was willing to fight for this.

Even within its own territory, however, the Republic was not the only authority that sought power and influence. In West Java, the Islamic movement Darul Islam sprang into the gap left by the Republic when Republican troops withdrew in January 1948 as part of the Dutch-Indonesian Renville Agreement. Moreover, the Republic’s authority was constantly threatened from within. The heterogeneous but nationalistic pemuda movement demanded a forward-looking, uncompromising position from the Republic, built on perjuangan (struggle) and total independence. This was at odds with the views in the political heart of the Republic, Yogyakarta, which left room for diplomatic negotiations with the Dutch. The Republican leaders wanted to demonstrate an organized state whilst simultaneously warding off a federation, while the pemuda insisted on the overthrow of both colonial structures and local Indonesian traditions.

In areas where more than one of these nascent authorities operated, often border areas, the residents lived between two or more parties that each demanded support and, if necessary, attempted to extract it by force. Local communities developed a strategy that involved shifting and multiple loyalties. This could bring temporary benefits. First, showing support to those in power at any time offered a chance to escape the violence that, in the absence of such support, would almost inevitably follow. Second, these connections – however short-lived they might be – also brought opportunities: benefits in the form of access to food, clothing and so forth. Moreover, showing loyalty offered a chance to gain personal influence or secure interests. For example, Chinese or Indonesians joined armed groups under Dutch supervision in order to protect their own communities, and Indonesians joined pemuda armed groups in order to assert themselves or protect their villages or families.

When a single authority succeeded in asserting itself in a certain area for a longer period, loyalty to other authorities usually decreased or even seemed to disappear altogether. Such a demonstrative transition signified obedience to the new authority and prevented revenge for earlier ‘collaboration’. For example, Republican chiefs whose desa suddenly found themselves in Dutch territory after military action often remained in their posts, but under Dutch authority – which, one should add, was often in line with tra-
ditional power structures at the local level. For similar reasons, police agents and officials ‘deserted’ from the Dutch to the Republican side, and officials and politicians from autonomous federal areas maintained contact, openly or otherwise, with representatives of the Republic. A pragmatic – perhaps opportunistic – stance was often unavoidable.

For the Dutch administration and the Dutch armed forces, but equally for their Republican adversaries, such shifts in loyalty often came as an unpleasant surprise, because they thought they had a ‘grip’ on the population. However, the Republic – with its message of merdeka, which eclipsed the Dutch promises – prevailed. It did not become clear until the end of the war how far the balance had tipped against the Netherlands: whilst support for the Republic had only grown, local support for the colonial government had largely evaporated.

Bersiap and the Violence in the First Phase of the Indonesian Revolution

In the Netherlands, the months between October 1945 and March 1946 are known as ‘bersiap’; a period that Indies-Dutch and Moluccan communities in the Netherlands remember as being characterized by widespread, irregular and often extreme Indonesian violence against Indo-European, Dutch and Moluccan citizens. These events in the first months after the Japanese surrender are often viewed in isolation in the Dutch and English historiography, but in order to deepen our understanding of this period, it is necessary and also more meaningful to see them as the first phase of the Indonesian War of Independence.

The outbursts of extreme violence against Indo-Europeans, Moluccans and Dutch should not be viewed as isolated phenomena, but placed in the context of what German historian Christian Gerlach calls an ‘extremely violent society’, a concept that may be applied to large parts of Indonesia in this first phase of the revolution. The violence also continued after March 1946, we should add, although it unfolded very differently in different communities. This becomes clear when we also consider the violence against civilians and captured fighters outside Java and Sumatra, and against communities and parties other than Indo-Europeans, Dutch and Moluccans.

Violence by Indonesian pemuda was directed against Indo-European, Moluccan and Dutch civilians, as well as against Indonesian civilians who were seen – rightly or wrongly – as representatives of the colonial administration. Other groups and individuals whom Indonesian armed groups
considered a threat to Indonesian independence were also potential targets. Pemuda also murdered, tortured and mutilated Japanese and British captured soldiers, and Chinese and Japanese civilians. The violence was perpetrated by multiple parties. Japanese, British and Dutch troops and armed groups on the Dutch side contributed in turn, shooting indiscriminately at unarmed and armed Indonesian civilians and executing prisoners without trial.

In short, the extreme violence against civilians and captured fighters in this period took place along socio-economic as well as ‘ethnic’ lines. Indonesia could be described as an extremely violent society, as defined by Gerlach: a society in which different communities fall victim to omnipresent physical and non-physical violence, committed by multiple parties and social groups, often in collaboration with official organizations. The reasons for this violence varied widely, from political, social and religious motives to punishment for (alleged) collaboration and opposition to the revolution. Furthermore, there were personal, criminal and opportunistic motives for the violence that had little to do with anti-colonial or political motivations.

The violent nature of this earliest period of the revolution is revealed by the casualty numbers for the various population groups. The groups that probably suffered the most civilian casualties in this period – the Indonesians and the Chinese – are also the least well-documented. Unfortunately, sources on the Indonesian and Chinese victims are scarce, but it is estimated that there were many tens of thousands of victims. Large-scale violence by the British, especially during the second phase of the Battle of Surabaya in November 1945, claimed thousands of Indonesian lives, including those of many civilians. In the same period, hundreds of Japanese civilians and dozens of captured Japanese soldiers were also killed.

Based on our own research – which drew on the Netherlands War Graves Foundation’s database of victims and lists and files containing names from various archives – into the victims on the Dutch side between 17 August 1945 and 31 March 1946, including Indo-European, Moluccan and Indonesian fatalities, we arrived at a substantiated figure of 3,723 fatalities on the Dutch side, 1,344 of whom certainly died as a result of the violence. If we add the 2,000 missing persons who were still registered in December 1949, and the more than 125 people who died, who were found in the sources used but whose date of death is unknown, and who therefore cannot be included as victims, then we arrive at a substantiated estimate of almost 6,000 fatalities. This number is very similar to earlier estimates, and contradicts the estimates of 20,000 or even 30,000 victims that have
circulated in the past two decades, based on unsubstantiated assumptions and extrapolations.

More recently, it has been suggested that the violence during the earliest phase of the Indonesian Revolution was an important reason for the Dutch military intervention. The sources from the years 1945-1949 reveal a different picture: ‘bersiap violence’ was not the reason for the reoccupation of Indonesia or for the dispatch of Dutch troops. In military and government communications and in the media, attention was paid to this violence, but in the form of rather sporadic reports of acts of violence committed by individual ‘rampokkers’, ‘peloppers’ and extremists in irregular actions. It was clearly indicated that this violence was not random, but that it was mainly perpetrated against groups that were suspected of opposition to independence, or that were associated with traditional or colonial authority: Indo-Dutch and Europeans, but also British Indians, Japanese, Chinese and, above all, Indonesians. However, these reports do not reflect the idea of ‘bersiap’ as a deliberate campaign against one clearly defined community. The concept of bersiap as targeted Indonesian violence against Indo-Europeans, Moluccans and Dutch was only developed in the Dutch culture of remembrance from the 1980s onwards. This narrative has become increasingly dominant in recent years, along with rising estimates of casualties, which are sometimes even framed in terms of genocide. At the same time, the ‘bersiap period’ often featured in veterans’ and Indo-Dutch memoirs as a retrospective justification for the deployment of Dutch troops in Indonesia and the Dutch use of force against Indonesians.

**Extreme violence by the intelligence services**

In the district court of The Hague in 2014, the 86-year-old Javanese Yaseman testified to having been mistreated by the Dutch intelligence service during his imprisonment in 1947. As well as being tortured with electricity and subjected to waterboarding, he had been struck on the head with a stick and burned with a cigarette. Yaseman’s experience was by no means exceptional. Countless harrowing stories are documented, including testimonies by Dutch administrators, public prosecutors and (intelligence) servicemen themselves, about a whole range of gruesome torture practices. Furthermore, it is documented how some intelligence and security services pursued a reign of terror in places such as Salatiga and Payakumbuh. These tragedies, virtually unknown in the Netherlands, are illustrative of the enormous physical and psychological impact of such terror on the local population. Mass arrests, which were frequent-
ly led by the intelligence services, and the associated internment caused great suffering and uncertainty for those involved and their families.

These are not isolated cases, as mentioned above. This research has shown that the intelligence services, whose regular staff accounted for only some 2.5 to 3 per cent of the armed forces, made systematic use of torture and played a disproportionate role in the extreme violence used by the Dutch during the Indonesian War of Independence. The precise extent of these practices cannot be determined, in part due to the fragmentary nature of the sources and demonstrable underreporting. The fact that the intelligence services in particular used extreme violence on a large scale was partly due to the specialized nature of their work – the interrogation of prisoners – and the leading and guiding role they played in the chaotic counter-guerrilla war, in which information was crucial.

Whereas in so-called ‘regular’ armed confrontations, the better-armed and often better-trained Dutch armed forces had the advantage, the opposite was true in the vicious intelligence battle. No matter how much the Dutch services tried to chart the strength and movements of the adversary and to bring an end to enemy infiltration and espionage, they repeatedly failed. The services, which were frequently amateurish and struggled with staff shortages and language difficulties, had to cover an enormous area, certainly after the territorial expansion following the two ‘successful’ Dutch offensives. They had to operate in an enormous, often unfamiliar territory, whilst the more finely tuned Indonesian intelligence apparatus, like the army, could rely more heavily on local people, who played such a crucial role in guerrilla warfare. Moreover, Dutch military and civilian institutions were often infiltrated by enemy agents. The battle was vicious, as mentioned above: Indonesian counter-intelligence also used extremely violent methods, as shown by the liquidation and intimidation of countless alleged collaborators and spies in Dutch service.

In order to fight the Indonesian guerrillas, the Dutch army was highly dependent on information from the intelligence and security services. To gather this information, systematic use was made of ill-treatment and torture, in the knowledge of the army command and subordinate commanders. After interrogation, prisoners were not infrequently killed. Nevertheless, the quality of the intelligence often turned out to be poor, which could have the indirect effect of promoting extreme violence throughout the armed forces; for example, when infantry units vented their frustration on prisoners and civilians or their property after the umpteenth failed operation.
Furthermore, torture was often used to force confessions from detainees so that they could be brought to trial.

The intelligence services, which were dominated by KNIL personnel and the KNIL mindset, also relentlessly hunted down individuals whom they considered to be ‘gang leaders’; clandestine operations that often took place at night, in civilian clothing, and behind the demarcation lines. In addition, the services more or less openly pursued a reign of terror in areas that were seen as troublesome, with the aim of suppressing the Republican resistance through the use of terror and collective intimidation of the local population. In addition to murder and torture, this intimidation frequently included arbitrary mass arrests. The KNIL had left its mark on these intelligence-service practices: intimidation and deterrence formed the military-psychological pillars of the traditionally heavy-handed KNIL operations to suppress potentially rebellious Indonesian masses.

A broad coalition of parties bore direct or indirect responsibility for the widespread and disproportionate share of extreme violence by the intelligence services. At the senior administrative level, politicians and administrators held considerable responsibility, because despite receiving information about the systematic use of extreme violence by the intelligence services, they failed to keep the latter in check. Even greater responsibility was borne by the army leadership, to whom the services were directly subordinate. Among the middle ranks, substantial responsibility was borne by the commanders of the brigades, battalions and companies to which intelligence units were attached and by intelligence officers. These officers gave the services or soldiers a free hand, so long as they received what was deemed to be crucial intelligence, whilst turning a blind eye to predictable acts of extreme violence. The personnel at the lowest level – mainly interrogators and Indonesian and non-Indonesian support staff – also bear some of the blame, of course: they, too, always had a choice.

As far as punishment was concerned, intelligence service personnel and their superiors almost invariably emerged unscathed, because military interest – or, more precisely, the primacy of warfare – prevailed. Although the army leadership, deputy commanders and the military justice system knew all too well that torture was taking place, they often helped to conceal it and intervened inconsistently, if at all. Apparently they wanted torture to be used. Anyone who wanted to raise the issue or challenge the cover-up could expect opposition and sometimes even threats.
When intelligence servicemen looked back in reports and memoirs on their actions inside and outside the interrogation chambers, they – like their fellow soldiers – tended to link these to what they saw as ‘military necessity’. The problem with this reasoning is that ‘military necessity’ is an elastic concept that can serve not only to justify one’s own actions, but also – usually successfully – to prevent investigation. From the highest echelons to the lowest, the torture of prisoners, particularly as part of the vicious and secretive counter-guerrilla, was considered an essential means of extracting supposedly crucial intelligence and thereby limiting the losses on one’s own side. Looking back, some of these soldiers described balancing ethics against ‘necessity’ as a dilemma. In doing so they acknowledged, sometimes with reference to international humanitarian law, that their actions – even according to contemporary frames of reference – had been both legally and morally beyond the pale.

**The Myth of Targeted and Small-Scale Action**

The use of heavy weapons, such as artillery, attack aircraft and naval gunfire, could have dramatic consequences, not least for the civilian population. One such case was the shelling of Karanganyar (Central Java) in October 1947, which probably resulted in hundreds of deaths. By using this ‘technical violence’, often to support the infantry, the Dutch armed forces attempted to minimize the risks to their own troops, and were thereby prepared to accept the risk of large numbers of civilian casualties. The shelling and bombing certainly had a massive psychological impact, too; intimidation was a standard part of Dutch warfare.

Although naval and field artillery were commonly deployed in colonial wars and were a traditional component of the regular arsenal of the KNIL and the navy, their deployment during the Indonesian War of Independence was not only a colonial phenomenon, but also an outcome of the Second World War. Many soldiers who operated heavy weapons had been trained by the Allies during or after the war. Many of them had also gained active combat experience in the European theatre of war or in the battle against Japan, in which artillery support had played a dominant role. The Dutch ‘combined actions’ during the Indonesian War of Independence reflected a tactic that had been perfected in the preceding period.

In many cases, it is impossible even to approximate how many victims were claimed by this specific form of violence. A contributing factor is that due to the longer fire distance, the effect of the deployment of artillery and
aircraft was often indistinguishable from the violence used by the infantry, such as rifle, machine gun and mortar fire. The frequent use of ‘technical violence’ by Dutch troops is at odds with the myth cultivated by Army Commander General Spoor that Dutch soldiers acted in a small-scale, targeted fashion: ‘police actions’ extolled as the ‘Dutch method’. In practice, Dutch action was rather characterized by an inability and an unwillingness to distinguish between civilians and fighters, with the use of (technical) violence creating a high risk of disproportionate damage and civilian casualties. *Kriegsraison* prevailed.

The two phases that followed the Dutch ‘police actions’ and that were largely characterized by guerrilla warfare were the most intensive months for the artillery. The air forces were regularly deployed during these periods, too, although the number of ‘violence sorties’ clearly peaked during the two major Dutch offensives. The use of heavy weapons was mainly limited by shortages of material, personnel and ammunition, as well as logistical challenges. To a lesser extent, political considerations played a role. Harsh military actions could provoke international criticism and thus boost the Republic’s cause. The use of aircraft in particular was politically sensitive, and this sometimes led to restraint. Political agreements and the consequent international monitoring did limit the use of artillery to some extent, but the Dutch armed forces were regularly able to circumvent these restrictions, for example by operating only when there were no United Nations observers around.

Legal considerations did not play a major role in the use of technical violence; the use of heavy weapons was not scrutinized by the military justice system. International law in this field was hardly developed at the time, either. Those who were involved at all levels did reflect on the risk to civilian lives and the ethical aspects of the deployment, however, and most appear to have accepted this risk. This does not mean that no one cared about the consequences, as shown by later testimonies; the effects of bombardments do not need to be *seen* in order to be understood and felt. Responsibility is thus also borne by the military personnel who were directly involved in this violence, although it was ultimately the senior commanders who made decisions on the deployment of heavy weapons.

**Impunity and Ruthlessness**

In large parts of the archipelago during the revolution, Dutch emergency laws provided the legal framework in which administrative and legal measures were taken. On the question of whether international humanitarian law
was applicable, the Netherlands took a dual stance: although it maintained
to the outside world that humanitarian law did not apply because the Neth-
erlands did not recognize the sovereignty of the Republic, humanitarian law
did serve as a guide for action in the instructions and admonitions issued by
the Dutch armed forces, albeit selectively. In practice, however, these prin-
ciples were easily abandoned – and, ultimately, almost everything necessary
to defend Dutch interests was considered justified.

This is shown by the almost total failure to punish the extreme violence
perpetrated by Dutch military in the context of what was considered to be
military action. The partisan military-judicial system punished only some
400 possible cases of extreme violence (in addition to the hundreds of cases
of looting). A careful analysis of the judgements by the courts martial shows
that the military justice system, under pressure from the military author-
ities, often neglected to punish ‘functional violence’ such as the killing of
prisoners, the use of torture in interrogations and the torching of kampongs.
Those who committed crimes that were not considered to be functional ran
a slightly higher risk of (relatively severe) punishment. These were often in-
dividual actions of an unusually cruel nature or that were committed openly,
such as rapes or killings in public places such as markets. Even when it came
to these crimes, however, judges showed a high degree of understanding for
the servicemen and their position, and military interests were the primary
concern.

At every step in the legal proceedings, and thus at all levels, forces were at
work to hinder or prevent prosecution. Responsibility for punishing or not
punishing violence committed by Dutch soldiers was borne by every link in
the chain of military justice, starting with the commander responsible, who
had to report potential crimes, via the judge advocates up to members of
the court martial and the High Military Court. The Army Commander in
particular bore significant responsibility, as he had the last word on whether
to prosecute servicemen, and he also had to approve the verdicts.

The actions – or failure to act – of the military justice system in Indonesia
had direct consequences for the use of violence on the Dutch side. In oper-
ational terms, failing to punish or punishing belatedly had the advantage of
maintaining troop strength and morale in the field for as long as possible. In
addition, virtual impunity for extreme violence or serious crimes that were
thought to play a functional role in the conflict allowed perpetrators to cross
the line on multiple occasions. The actions of the justice system therefore
had little preventive effect.
Whilst the Dutch (military) justice system left Dutch servicemen virtually unpunished, the law was used actively against Indonesians who had turned against the colonial authority. Not only were severe sentences frequently pronounced, but during the war the Dutch authorities also resorted to the established colonial measures of internment and exiling of political opponents. In addition, all kinds of resistance against Dutch authority were criminalized, meaning that harsh punishments could be imposed. Tens of thousands of Indonesians were detained in overcrowded internment camps and prisons. Several hundred of them were sentenced to death. Illustrative of the instrumentalization of law as a weapon is the establishment of the special courts martial, which consisted of a single military judge who had to administer fast-track proceedings; important legal principles were thereby jettisoned in a bid to eliminate the Indonesian opposition. On paper this prevented extrajudicial executions, but in practice it resulted in the legalization of many executions by the justice system.

The impact of the judicial action on the Indonesian population cannot be gauged with precision, but it can be said with certainty that internees and prisoners had to endure much physical and mental hardship. The large-scale internment and punishment of Indonesians who were suspected of resisting Dutch colonial rule resulted in a temporary numerical weakening of the Republic’s armed forces. On the other hand, the harsh punishments and measures are likely to have motivated rather than deterred opponents. Prisons and internment camps gave Indonesians an opportunity to unite, share nationalist sentiments and plan new actions. The relatives of internees or convicted Indonesians were also affected by the actions of the justice system. Not only did they lose breadwinners, but they also lived in fear and uncertainty about their fate.

When Dutch soldiers were tried, the Indonesian sense of justice was almost completely ignored. Although Indonesian victims were sometimes put forward as witnesses, this was largely done in order to wind up cases or to justify harsh punishments when the perpetrators were accused of harming innocent Indonesians. Even more often, statements by Indonesians were not even taken into account. When weighing up whether to prosecute, not only the feelings and interests of the Indonesians, but also basic legal principles – such as providing (able) counsel and an orderly report, as well as the omission of coercive measures in order to obtain confessions from ‘suspects’ – were subordinated to those of the Dutch military organ-
ization. By contrast, in the case of European victims, such as during the bersiap murders, significant attention was paid to the suffering and impact of the deeds.

Army Commander General Spoor insisted to the outside world that all crimes committed by Dutch military were being or would be severely punished. That mantra was repeated by veterans for years, and it also appeared in the *Excessennota*, along with the incorrect conclusion that hardly any cases had been dropped. The possibility of refuting these claims was made more complex, deliberately or otherwise, by the extremely concise and vague manner in which the data and findings on the courts-martial were presented in appendices 5-7 of the *Excessennota*. However, an examination of the original sources reveals that whilst some cases were flagged, the organs of the (military) justice system actively turned a blind eye in practice, and in so doing formed a key pillar of the policy of condonation.

**Violence, Information and Responsibility**

Dutch politicians, administrators and military leaders were remarkably tolerant of the violence used during the war with the Republic. Waging war and condoning large-scale violence were political choices. We cannot understand these choices without considering the way in which information about and knowledge of the violence were disseminated, restricted and manipulated.

Many of the extreme forms of violence took place during patrols, purges and punishments. In reporting to the higher echelons, the precise course of events during these actions – more specifically, the unpleasant details – tended to be concealed. The primary responsibility for providing information to the colonial government in Batavia/Jakarta and politicians in The Hague lay with the army, in particular Army Commander General Spoor and his successor, Buurman van Vreeden. They monopolized the reporting and attempted to influence top officials in Indonesia and the cabinet in The Hague. The nature of the violence used by Dutch troops was often concealed in the reports to the Dutch government, whilst the violence used by the opponent was highlighted and invariably presented as terroristic, extremist and illegitimate. The reports did not provoke critical questions as such in The Hague, but rather confirmed what people already believed: that an opponent which was considered to be unreliable was acting aggressively and ruthlessly.
As a rule, Batavia only informed the minister responsible about specific issues when questions were asked by the media and critical MPs, and the minister asked Batavia for clarification. The reactions of the colonial administration and army in Indonesia thereby assumed the character of scandal management. The army leadership systematically questioned accusations, discredited whistle-blowers, and underscored the necessity and the – expected – success of the military action. Although reports of extreme violence began to circulate more frequently in 1949 in particular, the judicial and civilian authorities were not willing to counter it. As only a few ‘scandals’ came to light, a situation arose in which atrocities could be presented as incidents and ‘excesses’, thus not only as violations of the law of war, but also as exceptions in a war that had as a rule been conducted correctly.

Condonation of violence was also facilitated by the fact that military objectives dominated decision-making, in line with the politically determined goal. On the Dutch side, the importance of restoring peace and order was widely endorsed; for that reason, the war was presented as inevitable. The colonial administration in Batavia, politicians in The Hague and most Dutch administrators in the archipelago internalized, consciously or unconsciously, the military terminology and way of thinking. Moreover, the war was waged in a system of authoritarian colonial power relations from which effective control mechanisms were absent. Indeed, the civilian administration recognized the primacy of the army in both its actions and its reporting.

The Indonesian population had only very limited access to justice and the authorities. The residents of affected villages and families did complain to Indonesian administrators, and the latter often put pen to paper to report acts of violence to the Dutch authorities. Action was rarely taken in response, however, because the military authorities – and not only they – refused to investigate or actively obstructed investigations, unless a case threatened to escalate, with possible negative effects in the Netherlands or the international community. The Republican authorities frequently raised cases at the United Nation’s monitoring commissions, whilst the Dutch tended to dismiss this as propaganda. Nevertheless, Republican politicians and representatives do not appear to have wished to highlight Dutch violence on a repeated or systematic basis, because political objectives prevailed and they were aware that Republican troops were also frequently guilty of violence against civilians and public officials.

Dutch politicians and administrators claimed to stand up for ‘well-meaning’ Indonesians, but a policy of ‘good intentions’ degenerated into the ‘dirty’
maintenance of public order. The image of the enemy was determined by racist and criminalizing images and language. In the end, the geographical and in particular the moral distance ensured that politicians in the Netherlands followed developments at a safe distance and accepted only marginal control of the armed forces. We call this phenomenon ‘colonial dissociation’. One part of this dissociation was the tradition that politicians in The Hague maintained a great distance from decision-making in the colony.

In the Netherlands, the conflict with Indonesia was the subject of a domestic political struggle. Concerns about the level of violence soon threatened to become politicized, and those responsible thus preferred to push them into the background. Critics of the violence were told that the violence could not be ended until a settlement with the Republic had been reached. Sooner or later, all of those responsible – the army leadership, senior officials in Jakarta/Batavia, the cabinet in The Hague, the MPs who were most involved – became aware of what happened during the war; namely, that extreme violence had been used on a frequent basis. They knowingly failed to take effective action to investigate the military violence and to control and punish transgressive actions. The ‘cover-up’ thus had the character of a collectively designed process. Thus, not only were the armed forces answerable for the consequences of the violence for the severely affected population of Indonesia, but also all those who were politically responsible.

**Bending under international pressure**

Whilst there were few forces in Dutch political, military and social institutions that exerted a moderating influence on the use of violence, international pressure did have this effect, albeit to a limited extent. It took a long time for the Netherlands to fully realize that support for colonialism had declined sharply, including in the West, and that the Cold War, though still young, was starting to create a new dynamic in global relations. Dutch diplomats, politicians and military leaders retained an overly rosy image of their actions in Indonesia, their international position, and the support they could expect from Western allies. One faulty assessment piled on top of another. The Netherlands did not want to accept that not only India, Australia and many other countries, but also their closest allies, the American and British governments, disapproved of the large-scale, aggressive military policy, despite their initially ambivalent attitude to the Republic. Their allies’ priorities were focused primarily on their own geopolitical interests, and support for a colonial war in Indonesia was at odds with these. Things were
different in the case of France, which, as a result of the war in Indochina, had interests that were similar to those of the Netherlands. The two countries therefore supported one another, though with some caution.

One important thread running through international involvement in the Indonesian-Dutch war was the call for the warring parties to refrain from using force and to resolve their differences peacefully. British and later also American pressure – with the cessation of Marshall Aid as a potential ‘stick’ in the background – forced Dutch politicians to negotiate and make what were perceived as painful concessions to the Republic. In particular, the two military offensives pursued by the Netherlands could not count on international support; in fact, the reverse was true and they had to be stopped prematurely, to the frustration of the Dutch. In that sense, international intervention had a moderating and ultimately decisive influence on the conflict.

The leaders of the Republic were aware that the internationalization of the conflict could work to their advantage, and they therefore actively promoted it. They invested in diplomatic relations and attempted to build an image of the Republic as a reliable and sound new state. Although the vast majority of countries did not formally recognize the Republic until after the transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949, many countries – and also the Security Council of the United Nations – had already recognized the Republic de facto as the representative of the Indonesian people and thus as an interlocutor.

After the departure of Japanese, Australian and British troops in late 1946, there was no longer any direct military involvement by third parties in the Indonesian-Dutch war. Yet at the same time, from mid-1947 the war was internationalized in the sense that the United Nations sent observers to the conflict area and the United States in particular started to play a mediating role, whilst Washington also stepped up pressure on both countries to reach an agreement at the negotiating table.

The pressure on the Netherlands included an arms embargo – for deployment in Indonesia, at least –imposed separately on the Netherlands by Great Britain and the United States. At the same time, the patchy way in which the two countries upheld the embargo suggested a wish to avoid alienating the Netherlands as a (potential) ally in the rapidly developing confrontation with the Soviet Union in Europe.

One should add that the desire of the United Nations and the United States in particular to resolve the Indonesian-Dutch conflict as rapidly and peacefully as possible also meant that it was considered inexpedient to pay
too much attention to complaints about extreme violence from both sides. The fear was that focusing on this issue would only drive the warring parties apart, which might adversely affect the negotiations. This was one of the reasons why many of the incidents of extreme violence reported by both parties remained unknown or unmentioned for a long time.

**Dutch violence in comparative perspective**

In order to help us interpret and explain Dutch military action in the Indonesian War of Independence, we compared the conflict in Indonesia with French and British wars of decolonization. After all, in the wake of the Second World War, the two biggest colonial powers faced large-scale armed opposition to their attempts at reoccupation – such as in Vietnam (1945-1954) – and during uprisings in colonies where they still exercised effective authority, such as Algeria (1954-1962), Kenya (1952-1960) and Malaysia (1948-1960). In our search for parallels and contrasts – comparison entails both, after all – many similarities emerged, especially when we focused on the nature and causes of the most extreme forms of violence.

Every colonial power believed that it had the right to prevent by force the loss of its colonies, or, in the longer term, to administer decolonization on its own terms. Nevertheless, the political processes differed considerably. The British were more effective at containing their relatively small-scale conflicts, as they were quicker to recognize that the colonial period was over, but also due to their more successful policy of divide and rule. The Netherlands and France allowed the conflicts to escalate, with the Vietnamese population additionally bearing the brunt of the high degree of internationalization of the conflict in the context of the Cold War, in the form of considerable Russian, Chinese and American support. As in Indonesia, the efforts of the former colonial power to retain close ties to Vietnam in a federal state were no match for nationalism, whether France deployed violent or non-violent means. In the settlement colony of Algeria, a break with France in any form whatsoever was completely taboo for the French throughout almost the entire conflict, leading to a violent escalation of the war.

Comparisons at the level of military action have been made in the past, but both contemporaries and later analysts tended to emphasize the contrasts in the ways in which colonial powers fought ‘their’ wars. The aim was to determine who had been more effective and who had acted more ruth-
In this research project, we rejected such classifications of blame and concluded that – despite differences in political context, the scale of the wars and the intensity of war violence – when we focus on the nature and causes of extreme violence, it is the similarities that prevail. Without exception, the three colonial great powers came to realize that this battle could not be won without considerable military effort, and without coercion and intimidating, collective, punitive violence. The intensity of the conflicts varied significantly, but contrary to the common excuse – ‘when you chop wood, chips fly’ – the degree of excessive violence was not proportional to the intensity of the warfare. For example, the relatively high casualty numbers among Kenyans and, in a certain sense, among Indonesians, are difficult to relate to the intensity of the combat alone; this was relatively low in these conflicts, when measured against military casualties on the colonial side.

The prevailing similarities can largely be explained by the fact that many of the atrocities took place far from the battlefield or on the margins of the actual conflict. Such atrocities included executions, torture, mass internment and forced deportations, and the punitive torching of homes, neighbourhoods and villages. Moreover, recent historical research has debunked the myth-making about the minimal use of force by the British, a myth that was perpetuated by ignoring the now-infamous Kenyan case and by emphasizing the later, less violent phase of the war in Malaysia. Analysts often overlooked the fact that this latter phase only began after a strategy of ‘counter-terror’, forced mass deportations and exile had done their work. In short, the overly sharp and extenuating contrast with many aspects of the French action in particular does not hold.

If we turn our comparative focus to the causes of the excessive violence, then we see that the institutionalized impunity that stemmed from the policy of condonation was not only characteristic of the Dutch situation, but also forms the connecting factor in explaining the structural character of British and French extreme violence. It was precisely this institutionalization...
that played an important role in the continuation or even the crystallization of certain practices. In all of the colonies and metropoles, the perpetrators, those giving orders, those turning a blind eye and those condoning action were at all levels spared punishment or seldom held accountable. The above-mentioned ‘colonial dissociation’ certainly played an important role for the British and for the French in Indochina, too. Impunity should be considered in the context of the strategic thinking behind the deployment of violence against non-combatants, however; for if anything becomes clear from the comparison, it is that the dynamics of violence in every one of these conflicts were such that all colonial powers – like the armed groups they were fighting – deployed targeted, intimidating and punitive violence against the civilian population on a considerable scale in their bid to win the war.

**From cover-up to painful recognition**

Successive Dutch cabinets proved unwilling, or barely willing, to take responsibility for the political and military actions of the Netherlands in the Indonesian War of Independence. Both during and after the war, the administrative reflex was invariably to avoid any serious investigation of the indications of extreme violence or, when it was impossible to ignore the facts, to keep the latter out of the political debate as much as possible. Another practice from the war years was thus continued: the failure to actively document incriminating facts, or the destruction of evidence. This evasive policy was pursued for twenty years with little protest, until the commotion that arose in 1969 around the television interview with war veteran Joop Hueting, who spoke frankly about war crimes committed by Dutch servicemen, himself included. Since then there has been tension between, on the one hand, the tendency to justify and hush up this history and, on the other hand, the pursuit of critical reflection, political and journalistic engagement and, more recently, the postcolonial debate, and the balance has slowly, in fits and starts, started to tip the other way.

This development can also be traced in official, ceremonial events. Whereas Queen Juliana spoke upon the transfer of sovereignty in 1949 of the ‘failure of generations,’ whereby all parties were thus to blame, in 2005 the Dutch government acknowledged its culpability with the metaphor of the Netherlands having been ‘on the wrong side of history’; and finally, in 2020, 75 years after the declaration of independence on 17 August 1945, King Willem-Alexander offered his apologies during a state visit to Indonesia for the ‘excessive violence’ on the part of the Dutch.
The assessment of the military action in the political arena has always been ambivalent. The potential criminal prosecution of war crimes was deliberately avoided for political reasons and is no longer a prospect today. The position taken by the government in 1969, that the armed forces as a whole had behaved correctly, has never been officially revised. Apologies and compensation for Indonesian victims – the size and scope of which has remained a matter of debate – only followed in 2011 after a mandatory court ruling, not out of free political choice.

There are a number of answers to the question of why the duty of accountability – including later punishment, for example through the exclusion in 1971 of war crimes committed in Indonesia from the statute of limitations – was evaded for so long. First, incumbent governments, certainly in the first decades after the war, did not wish to leave their predecessors in the lurch. This was not without reason, for there was a high degree of continuity between the parties and individuals who were politically responsible during and after the war. Moreover, there was a fear of legal and financial liability and reputational damage. The fact that for domestic reasons political leaders in the Republic of Indonesia never insisted on an investigation into Dutch war violence, and privately indicated that they would consider critical reflection inopportune, made it easier to maintain this stance.

Another important reason for putting this painful history of extreme violence to rest was electoral: there was little to be gained, only much to be lost, from critical self-reflection. More important in a political sense was the ‘Indies generation’, made up of more than 300,000 (Indo-)Dutch, Moluccan and Indo-Chinese immigrants and their descendants, plus another 125,000 veterans. Little attention – much less sympathy – was initially given to the fortunes of these very diverse groups, but this changed in the 1970s. Since then, there has been talk of ‘obligations’ to this ‘Indies generation’ and much energy has been put into improving what are seen as ‘delicate relations’.

As a result, these groups, particularly veterans’ organizations, have been able to make a significant mark on the way in which the war, especially the question of Dutch extreme violence, has been publicly commemorated and discussed. Successive cabinets have repeatedly and demonstrably inclined their ears to voices from this corner. Although these circles do not deny that regrettable ‘excesses’ took place, in their view they should not be attributed to the armed forces as such, even less so to individual soldiers, but primarily to politicians in The Hague. That a critical investigation or judgement...
could also have a negative effect on support for ongoing military missions also seems to have played a role in these considerations, both politically and among military leaders.

From an international comparative perspective, this story is far from exceptional. When it comes to the belated and limited openness about and painful handling of the often bloody reality of Dutch decolonization policy, the Netherlands does not differ substantially from other former colonial states. Elsewhere, too, recognition progressed in fits and starts, veterans and postcolonial migrants maintained a strong voice in debates, and governments hesitated about the wording and consequences of acknowledging their own countries’ war violence. There are notable differences, however, in the attitude of the former colonies when it comes to matters such as political reconciliation and claims for damages; and in that sense, comparatively speaking, Indonesia has certainly not made things difficult for the Netherlands.

In Summary

In this concluding section, we return to some of the themes that lie at the basis of the research programme, starting with the question of the way in which war was waged and the actions of the Dutch armed forces, as well as explanations for this, focusing on the level of violence and the forms of extreme violence that accompanied their deployment. Closely linked to this is the question of who was responsible for the extreme violence, and the extent to which responsibility was taken for it at the time and later.

The war that the Netherlands fought in Indonesia was in many respects a colonial phenomenon that formed part of a tradition of violent oppression, racism and exploitation. The political and military conflict between Indonesian nationalists and the Netherlands was fuelled by a clash of world views. Indonesian Republicans demanded an independent place in the post-war world order and held on to the will to determine their own fate; Dutch politicians, military and civil servants in Indonesia and the Netherlands allowed themselves to be guided by colonial impulses. Notions of their own superiority formed an important source of the Dutch desire to guide and control Indonesia. Indonesians thus confronted a state that wanted to impose its will on them, driven by economic and geopolitical motives and a belief in its continuing mission in the ‘East’ and its own indispensability. The decision to reoccupy Indonesia militarily and administratively was taken long before the end of the Second World War,
but its implementation was delayed by the major organizational problems afflicting the liberated Netherlands. In the final months of 1945, the desire to dispatch troops overseas may have become more urgent due to the widespread, irregular and fierce violence in the first phase of the Indonesian Revolution.

In the course of the war, the Netherlands did make concessions – on paper, at least – towards the partial dismantling of the former colonial state. The Dutch reluctantly recognized *de facto* the authority of the Republic in the area that it occupied, but they continued to aim for ‘decolonization’ in their chosen direction, a direction that was closely aligned with the traditional colonial policy and that capitalized on sometimes strong regional tensions and movements. This entailed the construction of a United States of Indonesia, of which the Republic would be no more than a federal state that would remain permanently tied to the Netherlands in a Union. That would have been a very limited kind of independence.

The extent to which the Netherlands had underestimated the broadly supported Indonesian aspirations for independence became manifest immediately after the Japanese surrender. Indications of widespread support among the population and a readiness to defend independence by force were ignored. The Republic was portrayed as a Japanese fabrication that would collapse as soon as Dutch rule and the army returned. Numerous Dutch sources expressed the belief that the masses were apolitical and that they were actually pro-Dutch, although they often dared not admit this for fear of the ‘extremists’.

The Dutch image of the ‘enemy’ was built on a long tradition of segregation in which the colony’s inhabitants were marginalized on racial and cultural grounds in a moral and social order based on Western ideas. The ability of the Indonesians to act constructively and autonomously was downplayed, or sometimes even denied. The Republic was said to be incapable of establishing a stable government, and the anti-colonial resistance was often branded as subversive, excessive and criminal. In the colonial tradition, this image of the enemy distinguished between the ‘well-meaning’ majority and a small group of ‘extremists’ who had to be fought. This legitimized taking a harsh approach. From the Dutch perspective, the Republic was an unreliable opponent, including when it came to political-military agreements and treaties. It had to be kept small or broken at all costs.

To achieve this goal, the Netherlands used all possible means, not least the armed forces. For this reason, the government decided to dispatch as
many as 95,000 to 100,000 involuntary conscript troops overseas, a decision that required a post-hoc amendment to the constitution. The objective was to defeat the Republic and its army and eliminate the other Indonesian armed groups, as well as occupy and control the population centres, key economic areas and lines of communication. A military approach was chosen to achieve this end, major components of which had already been used in the colonial past with varying degrees of success. This applied, among other things, to the ‘spearhead strategy’, the essence of which was that the armed forces, with mobile columns in a rapid offensive, making use of their material superiority and with great show of force, would capture the main enemy ‘sources of resistance’ and topple the military and political leadership. After this intended ‘decapitation’, the resistance, under pressure from the intimidating action, would collapse like a house of cards, leaving a single phase of ‘pacification’ to follow. The tactics used in this strategy – small-scale patrols, purges and the ‘restless pursuit’ of the opponent – had emphatically colonial roots.

As the Dutch armed forces had many more and better weapons at their disposal, they were able – especially during the two major military offensives – to achieve ostensible successes. However, these proved to be of limited value in a war that from mid-1947 increasingly assumed the character of a guerrilla conflict. The attempt to control an ever-larger territory overwhelmed the armed forces, mainly due to the actions of the TNI’s effective but also very harsh use of guerrilla tactics, with the broad – voluntarily, but sometimes under heavy pressure – support of the Indonesian population. The Dutch military apparatus was unable to formulate an effective response to this mode of combat, despite some initial successes in winning over the population, or parts of it, in some places. Nothing came of the intended reconstruction of the colonial state and the associated civilian institutions.

This is hardly surprising; the Dutch objective, particularly from mid-1947, of dominating enormous areas and the population determined the nature and intensity of the war, but the method used focused almost exclusively on destroying the enemy, rarely on controlling or winning over the population. That the Dutch armed forces did not succeed in their aim was not only due to limited resources and military doctrine, but also to the lack of vision on the part of the civil and military leadership, and what is described in the third chapter as the ‘mental component’, which was key to military effectiveness and fell short in almost every respect. Badly trained soldiers were dispatched and led by a cadre with insufficient knowledge, experience,
training and ethical awareness to carry out such an extremely complex and demanding military mission. This was all the more disastrous because it involved a morally complex guerrilla conflict, one that was also massive, intensive and harsh; a people’s war in which the distinction between combatant and non-combatant could seldom be made, resulting in increasing violence and the blurring of norms by all parties concerned.

Dutch counter-guerrilla warfare put the emphasis on small-scale patrols of a vast territory, sweeps by larger units, often supported by heavy weaponry, and collective punishment or deterrence of fighters and civilians by destroying homes and food supplies, among other things. These actions were frequently fuelled by fear, panic and distrust among the soldiers and their distrust of the civilian population, which often resulted in the latter becoming the victim. In order to obtain information and force confessions, the intelligence services made systematic use of heavy-handed interrogations and torture. That is not to say that the military action was always violent, of course. The troops provided limited and usually ad hoc medical aid and other forms of humanitarian assistance to foster goodwill, and they also helped to rebuild the infrastructure. Relations with the population could – at least ostensibly – be friendly, whilst many patrols and actions took place non-violently, partly as a consequence of the ‘invisibility’ of the enemy or the relative peace in a certain area.

Responsibility was passed along the hierarchical lines, from high to low. The result was autonomous action and few checks at the lowest operational levels. This great freedom of action at a low level was further promoted by the fact that the troops were dispersed over a large number of small and isolated posts, particularly in the second half of the war. Young and inexperienced officers and non-commissioned officers were thus given too much responsibility for the success of the counterguerrilla and territorial control in their sector, leaving a heavy mark on the way in which the war was fought. Not only the choice of an enemy-focused approach, but also inadequate military leadership at all levels – with the most important failure being the condoning or inadequate punishment of misdeeds – are key explanations for the use of extreme violence by the Dutch armed forces.

When it comes to quantifying the extent and consequences of extreme violence in the Indonesian War of Independence and thus also casualty numbers, it should be noted that the incomplete nature of the Dutch and Indonesian source material makes this impossible. Much was not reported and recorded, and much of what was recorded at the time was later lost or
deliberately destroyed; the post-war process of establishing the truth by holding interviews was limited in nature. It has simply proved impossible to give an approximation of how often extreme violence, broken down into its many forms, occurred. This also applies, as explained above, to determining the precise impact in terms of the dead, wounded and other victims on the Indonesian side, and to making a sharp distinction between military and civilian victims.

From the fragmented quantitative material, however, it can be concluded that the numbers of casualties as a result of military confrontations were distributed extremely unevenly. Against the widely circulated estimate of 100,000 Indonesian deaths, which was discussed at the beginning of this conclusion, there were around 5,300 deaths among the Dutch armed forces. According to Dutch military reports – which, as mentioned above, should be read with caution – for every death in Dutch military ranks there were twenty Indonesian deaths; and if we only count soldiers in Dutch service who were killed by force, this ratio rises to one in 40.

It is impossible to arrive at even a remotely accurate number, but countless and diverse sources provide convincing evidence and indications that many forms of extreme violence were used on a structural basis by units from the KL, the KNIL and the Marine Brigade; and this also happened on the Republican side. Much of that violence took place at the margins or even completely outside the actual combat, such as liquidations, executions without trial and the torching of houses and villages. When capturing, interning and interrogating prisoners and when carrying out reprisals, Dutch soldiers used violence in a structural and sometimes even systematic way, including abuse and torture. It was already known that the special forces (Depot Speciale Troepen, later Korps Speciale Troepen) were given carte blanche by the army leadership to use extreme violence, if needs be, to break the resistance and coerce the population into supporting the Netherlands – something that the special forces did on a large scale. The intelligence services likewise took and were granted the space to use extreme violence on a systematic basis. In the many purges and other combat operations, Dutch troops often used considerable firepower, including heavy weapons. In doing so, they regularly put civilian lives at risk, not least to minimize the risk of losses on their own side. However, the scale and the effects of this form of extreme violence cannot be determined with accuracy. In addition to the extreme violence that was considered more or less functional, which was intended to serve a military purpose, there was also
dysfunctional violence, including looting and rape. The former was tolerated or desired and seldom punished; the latter was not usually tolerated, but at any rate punished only sparingly.

In any case, the conflict was characterized by a high level of violence, although with significant differences according to place and time. Moreover, many boundaries were vague and fluid; between combatants and non-combatants, between periods of conflict and cease-fires, and also topographically, in the sense that there were no clear frontlines. In this complex context, it was seldom possible to draw a clear line between ‘permissible’ war violence and forms of extreme violence. Nevertheless, the military and civilian authorities were aware that the Dutch armed forces systematically crossed the line. This awareness did not result in a willingness to stop such acts.

The picture that emerges from the different sub-projects is of a colonial war that was waged in increasingly vicious and bitter fashion, and that became literally all-consuming. On the Dutch side, achieving a military victory became the guiding principle for a political majority and the administrative and military personnel who implemented this policy, in addition to limiting Dutch losses. Successive Dutch governments paved the way for this, in close consultation with an army leadership that put constant pressure on those who were politically responsible. From high to low, civil servants, diplomats and military, as well as the military and civilian justice systems, largely adhered to the belief that the conflict could and had to be settled by – violent – military means. This also applied to the majority of the media and other civil society institutions.

In Indonesia, the Netherlands waged the war under authoritarian power relations, meaning that in practice the army increasingly dominated the civilian administration. Checks and balances were lacking or were disabled. As critical voices in Dutch society were more or less marginalized, too, also due to active opposition from above – and, in the case of conscientious objectors, severely punished – in the end, in addition to the Republic’s successful military strategy of attrition, international pressure was needed to bring the Netherlands to the negotiating table. Although the Dutch government realized after the first quarter of 1949 that the war had become a hopeless undertaking, giving up proved to be a difficult and painful challenge. The Dutch protagonists hardly knew how to cast off their rigid pre-war colonial mindset, as well as their political and economic interests, and had great difficulty acknowledging the failure of the policy pursued since 1945.
With regard to responsibility: the Dutch armed forces as an institution were responsible for the violence used, including the extreme violence, but they operated, as mentioned above, in close consultation with and under the responsibility of the Dutch government. Dutch politicians, supported by their constituencies, did not take any responsibility for the war and the extreme violence, however, and they were able to follow this line because there was broad support for the war and because they were subject to little scrutiny. The geographical and in particular the psychological distance played a key role in this, with the Dutch individuals involved at all levels almost automatically applying different standards to the colonies and colonial subjects. They knew that crimes had been committed, albeit via what was often filtered information, yet they turned a blind eye and seldom took action. In practice, this amounted to an acceptance of extreme violence.

The research programme has shown that the actors on the Dutch side – politicians, military, civil servants, judges and others – were collectively and systematically willing to tolerate, justify and leave unpunished extreme violence in order to impose their will on the opponent and win the war. They acted in this way for the sake of the end-goal, convinced of their own rightness and invoking their own good intentions. People at all levels were prepared to cast aside the written and unwritten rules of justice, and with them their own sense of justice. Many sources testify to this, from soldiers in the field to senior administrators. That sense of justice – a moral order – guided people’s sense of right or wrong, and reflected their upbringing and education, subjective life experience, and interaction with their own community and society as a whole.

These norms and values were only partly enshrined in rules of conduct and regulations, but they did provide food for thought. It is striking that those involved frequently drew comparisons between their own behaviour or that of their fellow fighters and the criminal actions of the German and Japanese occupiers during the Second World War. That they were nevertheless prepared to cast moral frameworks aside can be explained in various ways: pressure of circumstances or hierarchical relationships, ideological considerations, a colonial mindset, fear, the will to survive, blunted mental capacities or brutalization as a result of wartime conditions. What remained was the devastating impact of the war and the violence, first and foremost on the Indonesians.

With this enormous impact, which has never received much attention in the Netherlands and which continues to have an effect in both Indonesia and in the Netherlands itself, we conclude this book. There were not only
countless, mainly Indonesian dead and wounded to mourn, but also other victims of physical violence, such as torture, rape and detention under inhumane conditions, and of non-physical violence, for example in the form of intimidation; of actions directed against property, such as the burning of *kampongs*, theft and the destruction of goods and food; and of large-scale internment and other repressive measures. In addition to all those who were directly affected, there were many who suffered indirectly or psychologically as a result of the war, including the families of detainees who were held captive for long periods. There were also the socio-economic effects of the naval blockade and, in a broader sense, the cost of delaying the rebuilding of the country by the Republic of Indonesia after the Japanese surrender. Many of these factors were not examined in depth in this research, but they form part of the material and immaterial harm caused to Indonesia by the Netherlands in this last major colonial war.