

Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Bart Luttkhuis (eds.), *Empire's Violent End: Comparing Dutch, British, and French Wars of Decolonization, 1945-1962* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022, 246 pp., ISBN 9781501764165).

The violence that accompanied the end of European empires has garnered increased attention from historians in recent years. Most of this attention, however, has focused on individual imperial powers and particular colonial conflicts. Insofar as broader comparative studies of decolonization have addressed the issue, their contributions are largely limited to casting doubts on self-congratulatory British claims that their withdrawal from empire was markedly more peaceful than that of the French or other European powers. The existing scholarship's limitations make *Empire's Violent End* an especially welcome addition to the study of its eponymous subject. Its contribution is at least two-fold. First, it places the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, which is usually overlooked in studies of the wars of decolonization, at the center of its inquiry. Second, it conducts a systematic, searching comparison of the Dutch struggle against Indonesian nationalists with French and British counter-insurgency campaigns in Indochina, Algeria, Malaya, Kenya, and elsewhere. All but two of the chapters are collaborative endeavors, co-authored by historians who are specialists in the Dutch and French or British cases. The result is that rarity, an edited volume that draws on the expertise of various historians while achieving much of the sense of purpose and analytical cohesion of a single-authored work.

The central aim of the study is to compare manifestations of 'extreme violence' in the Dutch, French, and British wars of decolonization. While Thijs Brocades Zaalberg and Bart Luttkhuis acknowledge in their introduction that it can be difficult to distinguish 'extreme' from 'regular' violence in warfare, they insist that many soldiers knew when they had crossed a moral boundary between the two. Their own 'commonsensical' definition of extreme violence is 'the deliberate targeting of those unable to defend themselves' (9).

In the chapters that follow, various dimensions of this violence are detailed. Huw Bennett and Peter Romijn point to British and Dutch colonial militaries' lack of accountability to metropolitan authorities as one reason why violence got out of hand. Roel Frakking and Martin Thomas argue that extreme violence was often exacerbated at the local level by conflict between insurgents and loyalists. The internecine character of these wars is also highlighted by Pierre Asselin and Henk Schulte Nordholt, whose examples include the ruthless assaults by French forces on Vietnamese civilians and Indonesian *pemuda*'s ferocious attacks on Europeans, Eurasians, and

Chinese. Stef Scagliola and Natalya Vince shift our attention to the rape of Indonesian and Algerian women by Dutch and French troops, demonstrating its place in the panoply of extreme violence. The degree to which heavy weaponry (artillery, air power, etc.) contributed to the death toll in the Indonesian conflict is examined by Azarja Harmanny and Brian McAllister Linn. Christiaan Harinck, in turn, conducts an inquest into the number of noncombatant casualties caused by the counterinsurgency campaigns carried out by the Netherlands, France, and Britain. Lastly, Raphaëlle Branche traces the shifting public and political responses over time to the violence these European countries had inflicted on colonial peoples, culminating in recent years in some measure of legal and moral reckoning.

The volume under review is itself a manifestation of that reckoning. It is part of a larger inquiry into the Indonesian conflict that three Dutch historical institutes launched in 2017. Some of the preliminary findings from the 2019 conference that resulted in the present volume were published in this journal a few years ago. The gestation of the project has been beneficial. Each of the essays in the volume is carefully crafted, amply documented, and analytically rigorous. By setting the Dutch East Indies at the center of a comparison with its French and British counterparts, the editors and their contributors avoid the tiresome debate about whether the British and the French adopted different modes of decolonization. Instead, they focus on the various manifestations of extreme violence that marked the ends of all three empires, including the indiscriminate murder of civilians, the frequent use of torture and rape, and the widespread reliance on collective punishment and mass internment. At the same time, the volume's authors are careful to show that these practices varied from place to place, reflecting the distinctive circumstances in each colonial society and the distinguishing characteristics of each imperial system. Like all good comparative histories, then, this one attends to the differences as well as the similarities among its case studies.

While *Empire's Violent End* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the wars of decolonization, it is not without shortcomings. As the editors acknowledge, the volume tells us little about the colonized peoples who were the vast majority of the victims of extreme violence – the main exception being the essay by Scagliola and Vince. It also neglects the crucial question of why some colonies' struggles for independence were so bloody, while others were not. Lastly, I am puzzled by the editors' preemptory dismissal of 'colonial violence' as a conceptual category, brushing it aside by stating that it 'may obscure more than it enlightens' (19). It is true that all wars require some degree of 'othering' of enemies and it is also true that few if any conflicts matched the extreme violence of the Second World War (which left its mark on postwar colonial wars). But the othering of colonial subjects by their imperial overlords preceded the wars of decolonization by a long shot; this was in fact an integral feature of colonialism's racial order.

Moreover, episodes of extreme violence had figured frequently in the conquest and control of colonies. If, as the editors argue, a sense of 'impunity' was instrumental to the onset of extreme violence, then this too was more prevalent in colonial than metropolitan settings. It was far easier for Europeans to carry out acts of violence against distant colonial subjects whom they saw as uncivilized others than it was against one another. Even as Europeans were codifying new human rights standards to guard against the recurrence of a World War II-style slaughter of the innocents, they were employing euphemisms like 'emergencies' to circumvent those same standards in their counterinsurgency campaigns against colonial subjects. All of these points seem to me to argue against the editors' view that 'colonial violence may need to be "de-exceptionalized"' (19), especially when their study concentrates on what can be described as the climactic moment of colonial violence. The irony is that this excellent book seems to make the very case its editors caution against.

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