

***Political uses of decolonization history:
Comparing the French, Dutch and British cases***

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Comparing the Wars of Decolonization, 1945-1962¹

Let me start by a caveat regarding the fact that I am a specialist of the French situation². This situation, with regard to the Algerian War, is, in many respects, unique. Compared to Great Britain with regard to the Mau Mau Uprising, the Netherlands with regard to the Indonesian War or even France with regard to the Indochina War, Algeria is an extreme case. Unlike the other territories of the French colonial empire, Algeria was divided into *départements* and considered a part of mainland France. Its inhabitants were French citizens. It was more than a territory inhabited by indigenous peoples where a more or less privileged colonial society had settled to exploit its resources; Algeria was the homeland of hundreds of thousands of people who had come from Europe over several generations. When the war broke out, these Europeans numbered one million out of a total population of nine million. Another unique feature: after the Algerian War, the peace agreements between the two countries made Algerians the first, then the second-largest group of foreigners on French soil. Today, probably more than two million people living in France are of Algerian descent. Over three generations, one demographer has estimated that 4.6% of the French population under age 60 has Algerian ancestors. In addition, nearly a million people of European origin were brought back to France after independence, and the descendants of Algerian Jews are also counted separately. In other words, the portion of French society with some tie to Algeria is much larger than for any other postcolonial situation.

If we add the fact that nearly 1.7 million French conscripts fought in the war, we can see why the Algerian War is unique and has left a unique legacy on French society.

¹ For additional information on this conference see

<https://www.ind45-50.org/en/conference-comparing-wars-decolonization-june-20-2019>

² I wish to remind the reader that this text has been made for an oral presentation.

Therefore no footnotes are provided. A proper written version for a publication would, of course, mention all the references.

Nevertheless, I hope I can persuade you that certain comparisons can be useful.

First of all, the French-Algerian case is like a magnifying mirror. It reveals some of the major stakes of the issue we are dealing with: the political uses of the history of extreme violence during decolonization wars.

Next, because comparisons always have the virtue of emphasizing the specific features and thinking about common points. We will have time during the conference to dig deeper into these differences and common points. In this talk, I would simply like to suggest a few possible paths.

My aim is to compare three situations, or more precisely, three countries³. I must add that we are speaking of the public uses of the past, and on this point, situations differ significantly. Many decolonization conflicts have simply been forgotten. There is no public discourse about them, or at least, not in the former colonial metropolises.

So focusing on public uses means starting by remembering that the fact that there is a public use has meaning in and of itself. This meaning is related to the past itself and to the present. Why does our society, or the societies of former colonial metropolises, remember this history, and how?

I would like to start with three remarks.

1/We are looking at the political uses of this past in the former metropolises: the Netherlands, Great Britain and France. Research including the former colonies would be very different.

2/We will focus only on the topic of the conference: counter-insurgency and extreme violence. Tangibly speaking, this means that we will look at the case of wars waged by troops sent by a political entity that considered itself to be an empire. These troops fought against armed groups supported by a portion of the population seeking independence, in other words, political sovereignty for a nation other than the colonizer. The Algerians wanted an independent Algeria, the Indonesians an Indonesia that was not the Dutch East Indies, and the Mau Mau a Kenya that was rid of the British and their allies.

3/These wars were not necessarily won by the side that started the war. But they all led to independence for new countries and, ultimately, the virtual end of the Dutch, British and French colonial empires.

The three countries studied also share a basic characteristic: they are all democracies. They were democracies during the war and have remained democracies since. These counter-insurgency wars that used extreme violence were waged by democracies. This characteristic sets them apart

³ All my thanks to Esther Zwinkels, Stef Scagliola and Huw Bennett for their answers to my questions regarding the Dutch and the British cases. I also wish to thank Christopher Mobley for his help with the English version of this text.

from Salazar's Portugal, in particular. These democracies did not always acknowledge that they were at war. Their basic principles (freedom of expression, free association, human rights, etc.) were harshly put to trial by the nature of these wars. Memories of this violence are thus a constant reminder of these trials, whether viewed as deviations or successes of democracy. Such memories are all the more vivid because the political regimes have not changed since the decolonization wars.

These three characteristics explain the nature of the actors that we will study today.

The political uses of the past are chiefly made by the state. Within the state, various actors are involved, and they must be clearly distinguished. For the purposes of our conference, we will pick out just the three basic and separate branches: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary.

Civil society may also be active. We can distinguish between political activists, for whom the issues related to the memory of decolonization wars are part of a broader struggle, and militants fighting over a specific memorial event, in most cases, the victims of this violence. Amongst these victims, we must also consider the place held by the formerly colonized peoples and their descendants.

The political uses of the past, of any past, must always be understood not in light of the past but in light of the present situation in societies. This is why, despite factual differences in the histories of the decolonization wars we are looking at, there may be common points that refer both to specific facts as to the way that Western European societies have dealt with their collective identities more broadly since the Second World War.

I propose starting by researching the lexicon that forms the basic parts of narratives that relate this past of extreme violence and counter-insurgency during decolonization conflicts.

I have borrowed the concept of a 'lexicon' from Lenz and Welzer, as a description of the contents and meanings of institutionalized, official memory. The two scholars work on the national basic narratives of the Holocaust across various European countries, and they have identified what can be regarded as a shared lexicon.

Unlike the Holocaust, the events that we are interested in are not all the same and did not all occur at the same time. However, we can view them as belonging to the same historical sequence of the Cold War and emergence of the Third World. The various countries and societies affected by the Holocaust also showed a diversity of situations, but this does not prevent us from thinking about the existence of a shared lexicon that, precisely so,

refers perhaps less to a shared experience than to a shared memory manufactured after the event.

So I'd like to start by seeking out this lexicon chronologically from the end of the decolonization wars to the present-day.

First of all, the end of the war. The colonizers' political aims were identical in these wars regardless of whether or not these aims were achieved. In each case, new nations joined the United Nations; the colonial empires had yielded. In counter-insurgency terms, however, the methods used by the colonizing nations were presented as victorious – either as part of a one-off victory as in Algiers in 1957, or a more far-reaching victory in the case of the Mau Mau. The question of defeat never arises.

These methods were theorized and modelled during the wars. They were advocated within NATO or during bilateral cooperation. They were a part of French or British military expertise that was exported. In fact, the two counter-insurgency schools were built as part of an old rivalry, going back to at least the 19th century and the wars of imperial conquest. This rivalry was further fuelled during the interwar period, notably in the League of Nations. After having been model colonizers, the French and British developed the idea that they had invented efficient models of repression: colonial policing for the British, and the doctrine of revolutionary war for the French.

With regard to the methods per se, the military forces were ready to admit to the extreme violence that they advocated. It all depended on the audience. And they chose their words carefully. However, the reality of camps, torture or psychological warfare are clearly described for this kind of war.

The first item in our lexicon is 'model'.

On a more public basis, this coincided with a political discourse that presented the end of colonial sovereignty as an opportunity or a success.

In France, General de Gaulle insisted on the economic investments that could be redirected to France's productive assets, and he resolutely focused the armed forces on nuclear dissuasion. The colonial empire was presented as a part of the past that modern France had no reason to regret.

Meanwhile, the British were proud of having maintained special ties with Kenya and having helped bring to power a team that was very indebted to the former colonial power.

As the Netherlands, the two countries committed to building the European Community to various degrees. They belonged to the Western bloc and had been founding members of NATO since 1949; their supranational context had simply shifted.

The voices that might propagate another narrative were not easily heard in public. The consensus dominated until at least the 1970s.

On the issue of extreme violence, the silence was deafening in the years or decades after the wars. The end of empires drove a refocusing on national territory; the indigenous populations remained in their native lands and could not be heard in the former metropolises, where they had become foreign. Their presence on European soil was seen as a temporary situation for migrant labour.

We must also mention that the wars ended with amnesties that allowed for two things: imprisoned independence fighters were released, and the potential for prosecution of the colonial armed forces became less likely. Not all amnesty decrees had exactly the same scope or covered exactly the same crimes, but the reality was nevertheless that the individuals who had committed crimes during actions to win the war would not be prosecuted. There was an ‘accountability gap’ from the start. This situation pushed away anything that might cast a shadow over the dominant narrative. Thus, **the second item in our lexicon: these wars were successful, with positive outcomes for the former metropolises.**

In the late 1960s, cracks began to appear in the image of success that these societies projected. There were several reasons for this: the 1968 revolts, echoes of the Vietnam War, and protests against the United States as a superpower, as well as domestic political balances whose foundations were shaken and the forthcoming global economic crisis. In a few years, the world changed very fast.

The issue of violence during decolonization wars returned to centre stage, for a period of time. However, it was difficult to go further than an analysis in terms of military excesses or special cases.

In the Netherlands, ‘Excessen Nota’, or memorandum on excesses, appeared in 1969. The question of violence was raised after a veteran had reported on national television on war crimes committed in Indonesia. The investigation that resulted in the Excessen Nota was based on documented cases of extreme violence in the Dutch archives. Following this report, veterans gave their eye-witness accounts in the press and on television: some of them reported crimes, others denied them. More broadly, during the war itself, the Dutch authorities had tried to euphemize the violent acts and dubbed most of the cases to be ‘alleged crimes’, ‘alleged excesses’, or ‘misdeeds’ at the worst. After the report, the truth was recognized but the official term ‘excesses’ allowed the issue of legal accountability to be evaded (as excesses are not necessarily crimes). We must remember that at exactly the same time, William Calley, a lieutenant in the US army, was being court-

martialled after being accused of conducting the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

In addition, the Dutch Prime Minister's official stance was that this report proved that the violence described as 'excesses' were not in any case structural violence, except for crimes committed by the Special Forces in South Sulawesi and members of the intelligence services. The term 'excesses' later gained sway to refer to this kind of violence.

In France, the debate coincided less with the Vietnam War and was focused on what would be the only topic for debate regarding extreme violence during the war: torture. No other war crime affected French public opinion as intensely as this issue during the war. It was still the focus of the debate in the early 1970s. The protagonists were two senior officers. General Massu defended his military record during the repression that he had ordered in Algiers in 1957, minimizing the violence of torture. General Bollardière argued against him by asserting the importance of respecting human rights and denouncing the moral corruption of the French army during the war. However, both men were speaking of a single period of the war that was made very famous by the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. The film, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, was released for the first time in France in 1971 for a very brief period. This was no coincidence.

The term 'battle', with its positive connotations (because a 'battle' is not a police operation, interrogations involving torture or murders disguised as escapes), refers to a very short period of the Algerian War: nine months of repression in Algiers, during a war that lasted seven and a half years over a territory four times larger than France.

Both generals were heroes of the Second World War. Their debate, carried out through successive books, occurred at a very specific moment in the history of the memory of the Second World War, more specifically, the history of the French state during that period. Henry Rousso has called this period 'the return of the repressed'.

The catalyst was a Franco-Swiss documentary filmed in 1969, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, made up of archive images and filmed testimonials. For four hours, former resistance fighters, ordinary citizens and former collaborators retold the period. *The Sorrow and the Pity* was disturbing because it did not fit into the dominant memorial theme of the era, which viewed the Resistance in heroic terms and was silent about the attitude of the vast majority of the French. This film is considered to be a break in the memory of the Nazi Occupation, as it showed the reality of collaboration.

In other words, it held up a cracked mirror to the French, whereas the political authorities had held up a smooth, but dishonest mirror. The film emphasized the Vichy regime's role, and more broadly, the complicity or indecisiveness of most French people.

The question of whether torture was justifiable during the Algerian War resurged in this context.

We must remember that the two historical sequences were not unrelated for the French at the time.

Similarly, in the Netherlands, the Second World War provided a memorial framework with a strong influence over post-war society. This was also a narrative framework to describe current events. In their diaries, the Dutch soldiers arriving in Indonesia often made the comparison with the Nazis... just as French soldiers were very troubled to see the French army behaving like the Germans had in France during their childhood.

In the Netherlands, resurging memories connecting the decolonization war to the Second World War had no practical effects. In 1971, a bill was passed to lift the statute of limitations on war crimes. It would only apply to crimes committed during the Second World War. The Dutch war crimes committed in Indonesia would be excluded from it. The De Jong government's stance on this period of history was quite clear: crimes that had not yet come under the statute of limitations could not be prosecuted.

The comparison with WW2 here serves in fact to distinguish between the situation of the Second World War and that of the Dutch East Indies. The violent acts committed during the decolonization war were described as 'excesses', i.e. acts that were the responsibility of individuals and not attributable to a system.

The fact that these memories returned to centre stage at approximately the same time was no accident. It was related to the experience of those who participated in the wars, and also to a broader context of looking at the Second World War in a new perspective. In France, the Vichy regime and the role of the French state was being questioned; in the Netherlands, the very high rate of extermination of the Jewish community was questioned – the Netherlands was the only Western European country to rival Eastern European countries on this tragic point.

Pieter Lagrou, by comparing France, Belgium and the Netherlands, has shown how the rediscovery, in the 1970s, of the scale of the genocide and the number of Jewish victims of the Second World War renewed the focus on these questions and looked at denial as revelatory of post-war societies.

The third item in our lexicon: repressed memories and the denial of the State's responsibilities.

The British situation is unique because Great Britain was not occupied during the Second World War and did not face the same ambiguities regarding its own past. However, the country also experienced a period questioning its values at that same time.

In the Dutch and French cases, questions about the decolonization war were raised in the public sphere. These questions dealt with the legality of violence and could prompt soul-searching about the legitimacy of power, notably by pointing out the absence of safeguards that could have prevented democratic abuses. These questions were asked in terms that suggested new sensibilities, with veterans being viewed as ‘perpetrators’.

What was a question about the past, in the Netherlands and France, was heated and timely issue in Great Britain because Northern Ireland was in the midst of the ‘Troubles’. The public debate became especially agitated as from 1969, with mixed references to the Second World War and colonization. In Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary were often taunted by civil rights protesters in the late 1960s/early 1970s for being ‘RUC-SS’ and, at the same time, Irish nationalists depicted the British Army’s actions in Northern Ireland as a colonial war.

More broadly speaking, this topic was part of a vast movement that affected all three countries, but especially Great Britain: human rights activism. I’m thinking particularly of the creation in 1961 of Amnesty International, one of the founding members of which (Sean Mac Bride) had been interned for ties with the IRA in the early 1920s. The 1970s were a major period of international visibility for the fight against the torture of political and military prisoners. Amnesty’s large campaign for the abolition of torture began in 1972. An International Conference for the Abolition of Torture was held in Paris in 1973, and the chairman of Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974. Then, in 1975, the United Nations published a declaration against torture. In 1977, Amnesty International received the Nobel Peace Prize, in turn, while the Geneva Convention was amended to take better account of unconventional warfare. It was in the spirit of the times to view the extreme violence of the wars of decolonization as a reality that western societies were no longer willing to accept.

The fourth term in our lexicon: human rights violations and perpetrators.

However, the issue of the colonial past faded. On this matter and other related matters.

Not until the 1990s and especially 2000s and 2010s did this issue return to the political forefront.

The 1990s were characterized by greater awareness of the ordinary participants in war (ordinary soldiers or civilians), who were viewed in a nuanced way including, in some cases, victimization.

In the Netherlands, *Oeroeg* (a 1947 novel) was adapted to the cinema in 1993, bringing into sharp focus the violence committed by both sides, but

notably by the Dutch. There were several TV documentaries, notably a 1995 film entitled *The Excesses of Rawagedeh*. The testimony by survivors and archive documents were devastating, prompting an investigation by the Ministry of Justice following questions in Parliament. The *Excessen Nota* report was republished. However, the investigation concluded that given the fact that at the time of the Excessen Nota the legislative body did not intend to enable prosecution of the crimes committed in Indonesia between 1945-1949, it was not considered 'worthwhile' to look into the matter more closely. War crimes had been committed by both sides, and there were no judicial repercussions.

Ordinary soldiers were again a topic for discussion. But they were not viewed simply as perpetrators. They were seen more ambiguously: they were also the victims of the war, who had to obey orders that the political authorities did not always assume responsibility for, even though in the end the political decision-makers should be accountable.

We must note that in the early 1990s, in the Netherlands, the pressing topic in the news is the intervention in the former Yugoslavia, and especially, the accusations against the Dutch soldiers acting as UN peacekeepers in Srebrenica.

After a lengthy investigation carried out by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (from 1996 to 2002) followed by a parliamentary inquiry (from June 2002 to January 2003), the view that veterans were more victims than perpetrators was strengthened. On this aspect, opinion polls defined certain nuances depending on the war in question: veterans of the Second World War were almost unanimously seen as heroes in a just war. For other military operations, from the decolonization war to the present-day, we can clearly see that survey respondents distinguish the government's role from the actions of soldiers. The divergence between these two assessments is strongest for the war in Indonesia. In respect of our topic, we can clearly see how this supports a view of ordinary soldiers as war victims, much more than as perpetrators of possible war crimes.

In France, as well, the 1990s and 2000s were decades during which fresh emphasis was given to the ordinary experiences of war and notably the experiences of ordinary soldiers. Several TV documentaries are evidence of this. *Les années algériennes* by Bernard Favre and *La guerre sans nom* by Bertrand Tavernier recorded the words of civilians and soldiers, who retold the war on the ground. Violence was not excluded from their narratives, but it was not the central theme, nor was violence limited to acts committed by the French.

In the same trend, in the Netherlands and in France, it is admitted that veterans can suffer from PTSD and can be viewed as war victims.

This was also the period, in France at least, that the war was officially recognized as such. Until 1999, the Algerian War was officially referred to only as a ‘police operation’. Parliament voted unanimously to change the name, and a national monument was unveiled in Paris in 2002, for the 40th anniversary of the end of the war.

The fifth term in our lexicon: a real war waged by an army of ordinary men

Since the 2000s, notably due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, war doctrines have changed radically. Counter-insurgency, or COIN, was hailed before being criticized. The French method and France’s colonial past were also used as a tactical reservoir. These experiences were revisited. Attempts were made to learn from the past by updating interrogation techniques, the search for intelligence, in which human intelligence reclaimed its full importance. During both the Algerian War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military intervention was complicated by the need to pick out the enemy hidden in the civilian population: independence fighters in Algeria, or radical Islamists, in Iraq and Afghanistan. The topic of the ‘enemy within’ returned to the forefront in France and Great Britain.

Here again, the past of the decolonization war was mobilized.

There are no major additions to the lexicon here. ‘Model’ is still present, but not as obvious as before.

However, what is really new over the past 15 years is the new visibility for the formerly colonized populations or their descendants.

In France, this began in 2005 when the French Parliament passed a law that stipulated, amongst other things, that schools were to teach the ‘positive role’ of colonization, ‘notably in North Africa’ – the expression traditionally used to speak of Algeria. Following this law, the president of Algeria protested and called for the controversial article to be repealed. By contrast, the Algerian state describes colonization as a crime against humanity. In France, historians and citizens protested publicly and also called for repeal. Nearly a year later, the president of France signed an act to withdraw this article. On this subject, the president had lost control over his parliamentary majority. In 2006, tensions needed to be calmed, especially as French cities had endured several weeks of serious urban rioting, with the authorities declaring a ‘state of emergency’ under laws dating back to the beginning of the Algerian War.

But this is not what was new. Reacting to the February 2005 law, people of colour, descendants of formerly colonized migrants, publicly spoke out to proclaim themselves ‘indigenous people of the Republic’. They eventually founded a political party. Their analysis was straightforward: they were

‘indigenous people of the Republic’ because the French Republic discriminated against them, following on from discriminations that were the foundation of the colonial system and society.

Their message about the colonial past was very clear: they denounced a fundamentally unequal and violent system. Going well beyond wars, they attacked colonialism and slavery in general and advocated specific political agency for these populations whose history was connected to colonialism. By reversing the stigmatism, they advocated political action, whereas the previous generations were described as being too passive and complacent towards the Republic viewed as still influenced by a colonial spirit.

Thus, in France, the visibility of colonized indigenous people occurred through political messages from those who claimed to be the descendants of the colonized. The participants in the war of liberation were not the most vocal. Nevertheless, an Algerian woman was the one who had rekindled the process in 2000, but she was unable to bring about a change in the public discourse about the past violence she had witnessed and suffered from.

This woman’s name was Louissette Ighilahriz. She had the courage to testify in the media about the torture and sexual violence she had endured at the hands of French troops in 1957. She filed a defamation lawsuit against the former Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces, who had been a lieutenant in Algeria in 1957, and who had accused her of lying. The general was found guilty and given a symbolic penalty. He appealed and was acquitted on grounds of good faith. The elderly lady appealed to the supreme court; two years later, her appeal was rejected and General Schmitt’s good faith was confirmed.

The French judicial system was unable to deal with the substance of the case. An amnesty law had made any criminal prosecution impossible, so the issue of the extreme violence committed during the Algerian War can only be presented before courts in charge of cases dealing with the freedom of expression.

Nevertheless, the political effects of such a ruling are not trivial for the status of the truth. Lacking a suitable judicial venue, the truth becomes a matter of free expression. The efforts of an Algerian woman, formerly colonized and a former militant for the National Liberation Front, would have no impact. The torture and rape she endured would not be recognized by the only French court competent to debate this topic.

In Great Britain and the Netherlands, formerly colonized people have also filed cases with the judicial systems. Unlike in France, some of these cases have been successful.

In the Netherlands, the question involved crimes committed in Rawagede and South Sulawesi. To begin with, the Prosecuting Office confirmed in

2012 that the crimes were time barred and perpetrators could not be prosecuted. The effects of the amnesty decree still hold sway and protect veterans. However, the Dutch state was sued in civil court by victims. The judicial system accepted the lawsuit filed by nine widows whose husbands had been summarily executed in the wartime massacres. The court rejected the state's invocation of the statute of limitations, and ordered it to pay the widows compensation for material damage (immaterial damage was rejected). For the other cases in South Sulawesi, the Dutch state initiated a settlement to compensate widows in similar execution cases, outside court. Apart from this financial aspect, there were political stakes: via the justice system, the Dutch state acknowledged its responsibility for the situation of these women. Thus, in addition to this recognition through the courts, there was recognition of this violence by the executive branch: the Dutch ambassador to Indonesia travelled to Balongsari (the current name of Rawagedeh) on the 64th anniversary of the massacre (on 9 December 2011) and officially apologized for the massacre.

In Great Britain, the question of the crimes committed during the repression of the Mau Mau Uprising was also raised by formerly colonized people, and also before the courts. In the early 2010s, four people filed suit for torture and violence that they had endured. The lawsuit was ruled to be admissible by the judge who turned down the executive branch's argument (in this case, the Foreign Office), which considered that anything that had occurred before 1963 should be handled by the new independent Kenyan government! The Foreign Office also argued that the witnesses that could have shed light on the issue of responsibility at the highest level were all dead. The judge considered that the archives would be a substitute. Indeed, new archives had been identified, and research by David Anderson, Caroline Elkins and Huw Bennett had revealed the magnitude of the repressive system.

Hence court cases quickly shifted public interest to the question of archives and the British state's handling of secrecy. Had records been destroyed or kept? Were they left in Kenya or brought back to Great Britain? Were they accessible, and if so, under what conditions, etc.?

This question is broader than that of colonial violence. Like everywhere in the European Union, it is linked to discussions about how our societies relate to the past, the question of individuals' right to be forgotten, as well as the state's duty to remember its past actions and citizens' right to know. These are very timely questions that have driven the EU's data protection regulation, with an exception for historical research, in 2016. This issue promises to bring about new developments in the future.

As for the Kenyans who sued Great Britain?

In 2013, a court ruled in favour of the Kenyan plaintiffs.

As in the Netherlands, the British government made an out-of-court settlement (i.e. payments) with more than 5,000 Kenyans who had been tortured whilst in British detention during the Mau Mau Uprising of the 1950s.

The question of hidden archives became a public affair, widely relayed in the media by historian David Anderson. He wrote the first book to establish scientifically the way in which the repression of the Mau Mau Uprising was based on widespread legalization and legitimation of illegal violence that was a direct continuation of the ordinary violence of the colonial system (violence involving land seizures, as well as police or political violence). The British authorities considered the situation to be an emergency, and this led to massive violations of the rights of independence fighters and activists. Contrary to some of his colleagues, David Anderson considered – as I did for the French case – that violence was a topic for historical scholarship that absolutely had to be explained in terms of the context of its appearance and execution.

Working in the archives, David Anderson became a de facto militant for access to documents and the need to do scientific historical research on these topics that were inconvenient for a portion of British public opinion and its political class. In this fight against state secrets, the alliance between historians and the media, political personalities and lawyers was decisive.

This is the same kind of alliance that appears to have paid off in the Netherlands in 2012 when three major research institutions (the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and the Netherlands Institute of Military History), together with some left-wing parties and a portion of the media, advocated for a broad scholarly enquiry into the violence of the decolonization war. They stated, from the outset, that they were distancing themselves from the legal vocabulary, on the one hand, and official euphemisms, on the other. They asked ‘to conduct research to understand how and why people were motivated to commit cruelties, which so far have been labelled as “excesses”.’

Nothing similar has happened in France.

In this country, the archives that enable the violence committed during the Algerian War to be documented are generally open. Researchers have been able to write about and demonstrate the systemic nature of torture during the war and the magnitude of war crimes, especially summary executions. The military court archives were recently opened up, and they show unequivocally how impunity was built during the war, well before the amnesty. Thanks to this impunity, a methodical system of repression that

was generally illegal under the laws of the era was developed. This is also what makes it very difficult or even impossible to document any specific cases; there are few or no archive records on specific cases.

In any case, criminal prosecution is totally ruled out, and plaintiffs have not yet filed civil suits (although this could change because French legal provisions were amended in 2018, making it possible for Algerians to file civil suits in French courts).

Nevertheless, the repressive system has been scientifically identified, and it has been demonstrated that France deliberately waged illegal war.

In the early 2000s, the executive branch could still state that torture and summary executions were acts by rogue individuals and ‘minority actions’.

From that date on, things have changed dramatically. Last year, in September 2018, the president of the Republic admitted that it was no longer possible to say that. His declaration was nevertheless carefully written to avoid offending the armed forces, and the vocabulary used moral terms (‘This system was the unfortunate ground for sometimes terrible acts’). Nevertheless, Mr Macron clearly said that torture had been ‘unpunished because it was regarded as a weapon [...] considered to be legitimate during that war, despite being illegal’.

By stating that successive governments had failed to ‘safeguard human rights, and first and foremost, the physical integrity of the women and men held in custody under their sovereignty’, he asserted that political accountability was key. In so doing, he could give a global message on the actions of the armed forces, stating that this speech was not aimed at casting general disgrace at all the individuals who had served in Algeria, and calling on France to look at this page of its history ‘with courage and lucidity’.

Regardless of whether responsibility for the colonial past and decolonization wars was expressed by the judiciary, the legislature or the executive, there is a common point in each country.

The sixth item in our lexicon: public recognition of the crime, and material or symbolic reparations

This last sequence is probably a sort of transitional sequence, as far as chronology is concerned. I see at least three themes that are emerging and might become stronger over the next years and decades.

1/ the gender issue. Women have been playing a big part in speaking out as victims. This gender issue has to do with the broader issue of women voices being listened to, especially on violence, in our societies.

2/ From the beginning of the 2000s onwards, from 9/11 for instance, there could be a shift not only in paradigms but a shift in the global framework. From WW2 until the end of the 1990s, public discourses on these wars had

to do with European identities, with these three countries in relation with their values, their culture, the collective identity as Europeans. From 2000s on, the paradigms that are being used to speak about these topics are less European than global. They have to do with the global three issues of

- 1/ slavery (in the three countries, people calling themselves “descendants of slaves” became very vocal, commemorative gesture were made, etc.) and then of colonialism as a picture much bigger than just wars of decolonization or liberation
- 2/ international right laws (with the International Penal Court in particular raising issues at an international level, after the International Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia or Rwanda)
- 3/ the former subalterns being able not only to speak and being listened to but also to influence and had an impact on the political and even the scientific agenda of the former metropolises.

To conclude, let me ask a question : have we reached the end of a cycle and start a new one? A cycle that began with victims being unable to speak, with soldiers unable to break their shameful or discreet silence, with the state’s official positive message the only one that could be heard. And at the end of this cycle or the beginning of another, not only could the victims speak, but they could also be heard, with soldiers admitting to the ambiguous situation they had been placed in, and states recognizing at least a portion of their responsibility in the violence of the wars of decolonization.

The conditions for historians to carry out their research have changed over the decades. While access to archives has generally improved, and witnesses have agreed to testify, society’s demands have increased and the pressure exerted on those who speak about the past has become stronger.

For historians, this does not necessarily mean that their working conditions have unequivocally improved. As new questions have gained public attention, people from different backgrounds, with many different motivations, have appealed to historians to investigate and report the truth. Historical truth must exist side by side with political truth and truth as determined by the courts. It must be articulated with these other spheres of truth, and historians must take stock of the many consequences of this situation. These questions are not new for contemporary historians.

They may be newer for those scholars who work on the extreme violence of decolonization wars. They also have certain specific features. The main specific feature is probably that this search for historical truth now involves the formerly colonized societies. How is it possible to work on this violence in those countries? How do historical narratives of this past resonate with the issues that these countries currently face? What can be done so that

these narratives, developed in the former metropolises, do not contribute to a reactivation of colonial domination, through scholarly or symbolic questions?

In any case, as we can see, the field of historical scholarship is not separate from the other fields, judicial or political. Historians are placed at the heart of the way in which our formerly imperial states and societies think of and depict themselves. National situations must also be positioned within a broader framework, and the issue before us today is the key issue of our historical period, which may be bringing to a close – albeit with some difficulty – a colonial and postcolonial sequence.