A monument to Westerling (and other possible futures)

Protschky, Susie

2025

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

A monument to Westerling (and other possible futures)

Susie Protschky
Inaugural Lecture 2 October 2025

I.
The Westerling Paradox

One of the most difficult things to do as a historian is to resist the pull of known outcomes. To go back to a time and place that was complex, contested and unscripted—just like our own—and where nobody knew what was going to happen. Where many futures were possible. Where some of them *almost* came to pass. But in failing, were quickly forgotten, submerged in histories written by victors, and in dangerous memories. Every historian in this room knows about those possible futures in their field, and how reconstructing them often gives important insights into the past and how it is remembered in the present.

The story of decolonisation in Southeast Asia in the mid twentieth century is rich with possible futures. With competing visions of how free nations might look. Who would be counted as their citizens and founding heroes. The ideological principles upon which they would be governed. The global alliances they might forge.[1] Indonesia's decolonisation was teeming with such futures. Their ghosts linger in the present. Indonesia might have become a communist nation, had first the Dutch colonial government and then Indonesian nationalists not suppressed and then brutally eradicated the Left (with the support of the United States) over the twentieth century. It might have remained a federation, but Sukarno put a decisive end to that. It might have become an Islamic state, but political Islam has taken other forms in Indonesia instead. It might have remained a Dutch colony.

That final 'might have' is one that resonates with possible futures for the Netherlands. What if the Netherlands had suppressed Indonesian independence, won the war in Indonesia in the late 1940s, and done so with international approval? What if the KNIL,[2] the Dutch colonial army, had never been abolished? What if hundreds of thousands of Indo-Dutch, Moluccans and Indies-born Europeans had never been refugees, first from a brutal Japanese regime, then an Indonesian government that saw no place for allies of the Dutch among its citizens. What if Dutch veterans had been welcomed as heroes when they returned to the Netherlands after war? It is in this possible future that Raymond Westerling has occupied an important place since the 1940s for some Dutch veterans of the Netherlands' war to prevent Indonesian independence (1945–9), and some members of the diaspora from the former Netherlands Indies.

Westerling was a captain of the KNIL, under whose command at least 3500 suspected Indonesian revolutionaries were summarily executed between December 1946 and March 1947 in South Sulawesi. He was also behind a shortlived coup, an attempt to overthrow the Republic of Indonesia only weeks after the ratification of its sovereignty in late December 1949.

I should say up front that I have no plans to write the next book on Westerling. Rather, as a historian of Dutch colonialism, and of Indonesia, I am interested in how figures like him illustrate a politics made by ordinary people and governing elites alike. In this chair in global political history, I am interested in how contested figures like Westerling generate icons, images and discourses that articulate claims and grievances among different groups; that express desires for recognition, for belonging, for power, for things to remain the same, or for change. It seems

to me that political histories of colonialism need to examine how war, conflict and exploitation have been and are normalised; the ways they have been deemed necessary for the functioning of all sorts of institutions in peace time; and to scrutinise *who has been served* by the unequal distribution of empathy, pride and shame that gathers around changing historical evaluations of colonialism and its beneficiaries.

In Indonesia today, Raymond Westerling is a symbol of colonial oppression and violence, to whom many good nationalists were martyred.[3] In the Netherlands, Raymond Westerling is a paradox. He is the darling of conservatives and the far right, among whom his brutality in Indonesia is deemed necessary for defending the higher aims of Dutch colonialism.[4] To Westerling's critics, he symbolises the worst elements of Dutch colonial violence. Most historians today consider him a perpetrator of war crimes—things that existed long before the international legal frameworks permitted the use of this term, particularly in colonial conflicts in Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

Westerling is a paradox in much the same way that my colleague in History here at the VU, Pepijn Brandon, has explained for Jan Pieterszoon Coen.[5] In Indonesia, Coen symbolises the infamy of Dutch colonialism in the time of the *kompani*. He is the infamous VOC-era governor-general, founder of Batavia, the Indies capital he built on the ruins of Jayakarta in 1621. The very same year Coen ordered a genocide in the Banda islands to secure the Company's monopoly of cloves, nutmeg and mace. For some in the Netherlands, he is the heroic founder of a great Dutch trading empire, perhaps the very essence of the 'VOC mentality',[6] symbol of a Dutch Golden Age. Coen's name and image are in many public places in the Netherlands. The Coen paradox is that he is omipresent because of 'general acceptance that he was a key figure' in Dutch colonial history. And yet, 'the violence unleashed by Coen is deemed exceptional and non-consequential for understanding the core features of Dutch expansion. The widespread condemnation of Coen—and by extension, a certain form of facile recognition for the "violent aspects" of the colonial past […]—can even function to redeem the history of Dutch colonialism itself.'[7]

When I first heard Pepijn on Coen, and how he functions in Dutch public life as a safety valve to regulate these contradictory narratives about colonialism in the Netherlands, I immediately thought of Raymond Westerling. I initially only toyed with the rhetorical possibilities of a monument to Westerling, like the many that have been devoted to Coen. Of course, no such monument to Westerling exists. There is only his gravestone at the Nieuwe Ooster cemetry in Amsterdam, not far from JB van Heutsz's tomb.[8] But there have been moments when a monument to Westerling seemed a possibility. Some are surprisingly recent. So, I am indeed going to describe the histories and possible futures of two of these monuments today. Inspired by the work of Indonesian artist and film-maker Timoteus Anggawan Kusno, I imagine the blueprints for these monuments as inky dark images, with haunting reference to what I have already seen in Dutch colonial archives and the public realm.

In Kusno's words: 'To imagine fictional realities is a matter of point of view and paradigm. […] [T]o imagine is to be aware and conscious of my memory and bodily and intellectual experience as a subject reflexively. Then to represent is another thing: what if we overlap and twist these two opposite ideas, then dive into the inbetween, in order to question things that are considered finished or do not exist.'[9]

II.
Westerling Victorious
(Bandung 1950)

The first monument to Westerling I will ask you to imagine was built in Bandung, West Java, several months after the coup that begin on 22nd January 1950. In reality, the coup ended the next day. It was planned by Westerling, and carried out by soldiers of the so-called APRA, or *Angkatan Perang Ratu Adil*, 'Legion of the Just King'. This was a company of a few hundred KNIL soldiers and *Regiment Speciale Troepen* (RST) who had deserted their barracks. These soldiers marched on the headquarters of the Siliwangi Division of the TNI (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia,* or Indonesian National Army) in central Bandung. A bloodbath ensued in which 94 TNI were killed. APRA troops held the headquarters for only a few hours before order was restored with cooperation between the Indonesian army and Dutch forces remaining in Bandung.[10]

Let's imagine for a few minutes that the coup succeeded as Westerling planned, spreading from Bandung to Jakarta and resulting in the overthrow of the Republic of Indonesia. A statue to Westerling is erected several months later, very pointedly on 26 July 1950: the exact date the KNIL was meant to be abolished. Instead, the KNIL has now become the Indonesian national army. The *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* is disbanded and its commanders executed. Raymond Westerling is commander in chief and interim president of the Republic of the United States of Indonesia, with Sultan Hamid II as Prime Minister. Sukarno, Hatta and Hamengkubuwono IX await their fate in prison on Nusa Kambangan.

Imagine a towering statue of Westerling standing on what was once the Oude Hospitaalweg (now renamed Jalan Westerling) in Bandung, at the site of the demolished Siliwangi Division Headquarters. He is wearing the uniform of the *Regiment Speciale Troepen*. On his sleeve is the APRA coat of arms that he especially designed for the coup.[11] Carved in marble beneath Westerling's feet is a monumental bas relief showing the heroic deeds of the legion's soldiers. The plaque at the monument's base gives thanks to Captain Raymond Westerling, 'The Turk', the Ratu Adil (Just King) of legend. It also lists the names of the 125 KNIL and RST soldiers—most of them Moluccans, Menadonese, Sundanese and Indo-Europeans—who actually brought down the TNI headquarters that fateful day.

Let's make some of the friezes based on photographs that were really taken shortly after the coup began in Bandung. Certain scenes that became iconic. The soldier scratching out the tiger coat of arms of the Siliwangi Division. Soldiers taking prisoners along the streets of Bandung.

Copies of these photographs actually exist in multiple archives across the Netherlands. They come from the private collections of veterans of the Dutch armed forces who returned from their service in Indonesia between 1945 and 1950. Some of these veterans had faught for Westerling. Like MJ Latumahina, who served a 10-month sentence for his part in the coup.[12] For Moluccan members of the KNIL like him, the photographs are bitter souvenirs of a last stand to restore their futures. To retain careers in an army that was to become the relic of a colonial past in a free Indonesia. To keep homes, communities and social status in a country that had valued them under Dutch rule.[13] Other soldiers who kept APRA coup photographs were white Dutch servicemen in the Dutch national army, like JH Buddingh. Buddingh knew Bandung well. He had been a customer at the Chinese restaurant Peiping, which became the backdrop for a macabre scene of city life carrying on as usual soon after the violent shoot-out in the Bandung streets.[14] For men like him these were trophy photographs. A chance to show that they had been there, part of this war in Indonesia, during which historic events like the Westerling coup occurred. They were also a chance see their enemies—now Indonesia's standing army—

humiliated, punished and destroyed like hunted animals. Finally, the photographs were wistful what-ifs. Traces of a last desperate attempt to reverse the course of history and restore Dutch rule in Indonesia. An outlet for Dutch soldiers' frustration at years spent fighting a cause that was ultimately lost.

The photographs were the subject of their own Dutch military police investigation in June 1950. According to Dutch authorities, the photos should not have existed, let alone been circulated. In early 1950, the situation in Indonesia for Dutch armed forces, which were demobilised but nowhere near fully evacuated, was legally still a 'time of war'.[15] That meant that the rules of press censorship maintained. The military police investigator was tasked with ascertaining who was responsible for taking and leaking the photographs. The answer to that question is a story I will tell another time. For now, I will say that several local studios in Bandung printed photographs from the scene of the coup, sometimes as postcards for local consumption. Which explains how they ended up in numerous Dutch veterans' albums in the Netherlands. Since Westerling was hiding out in Jakarta under Dutch protection until late February 1950,[16] there is even a good chance that he got his hands on photographs of the coup that he had missed.

The most gruesome images among the more than 20 that were meticulously documented by the military police and filed in the archives of the Ministry of Justice in The Hague were never published. Benign portraits of Westerling were typically the only photographs that accompanied reports of the coup attempt in Dutch and Indonesian newspapers in 1950. The nine that triggered the military police investigation, however, were taken at the scene of the APRA coup and leaked to a small Christian weekly in the Netherlands called *De Spiegel*.[17] The four-page, illustrated report in this newspaper showed only the most sanitised images of the coup. Just one of them, printed very small, shows a body lying under a jeep's wheel. The reporter claimed to have been a witness at the scene. She lauded soldiers who fought in a 'superior' way, with 'unbelievable discipline and control' and doing no harm to civilians. The TNI, by contrast, were described as shooting all over the place and abandoning their posts in panic. Then, Bandung residents looted the TNI headquarters, stripping fallen soldiers' bodies of their clothes and shoes. It is worth quoting the reporter on this at length, and thinking about it together with the photographs that Dutch military and judicial authorities tried to bury:

'What our own soldiers have always been so zealously accused of, what the unregulated troops of the APRA did not do the whole day, is what the Indonesian people in Bandung did, the people who had seen their own army flee. They looted. From the army of the Federated States of Indonesia. […] '[It was] our soldiers who protected the sleeping population. Then [before independence] as duty, now out of humanity.'[18]

In soldier Buddingh's album, white Dutch soldiers receive military honours for their role in re-establishing order. Westerling is everywhere credited with the coup, but nowhere to be seen. Indonesian soldiers of the KNIL, by contrast, are visually associated with the most brutal violence, proximate to the bodies of prisoners and slain TNI. Buddingh even repeated the stereotype of the *klewang*-wielding fury that the mostly Indonesian Korps Marechaussee had been famous for during the Aceh War, claiming that the bodies of several TNI soldiers had been 'worked over' with swords.

In the end, 125 men—all Indonesian or Indo-European soldiers of the KNIL—were convicted of crimes of military disorder, demoted and sentenced to custodial terms between seven and sixteen months long. Westerling had planned the action, but was far from Bandung when it began. He was on his way to the capital, and the whole thing was over before his plot for the Jakarta coup could even commence. Assisted by Dutch authorities, Westerling fled Java and

escaped to Singapore by boat. From there, he went to Brussels, then Tangier and Paris. He returned to the Netherlands in 1952, where he lived out the rest of his days a free man.[19]

The division of responsibility for the APRA coup in the justice proceedings, and in *De Spiegel*, is telling. Who was lauded, who was rewarded, who was punished, and who escaped to live another day, were all judgments meted out along racialised lines that cut a wide, deep swathe in how violence among Dutch armed forces during Indonesia's war of independence was remembered for decades after.[20] The story in *De Spiegel* was the first of many, after Indonesian independence, to repeat the Dutch myth of military actions as restorations of law and order. It was also one in a long queue of cover-ups and maladministrations of justice that resulted in perpetrators like Westerling going unpunished. The photographs veterans kept of Westerling's coup in their private collections were postcard-sized monuments to a possible future that caught many ex-combatants' imaginations. They are thus a view into how veterans themselves, in private and in public, have contributed to repeated refrains and stunning silences that make up public memory of the Dutch war in Indonesia.

III.
Westerling's Restoration
(Amsterdam, A Few Years from Now)

The second monument to Westerling I would like to conjure is built a few years in the future.[21] Somewhere in Amsterdam, not long after a government is formed under the prime ministership of far-right politician Geert Wilders. It portrays Westerling as a soldier again, in his KNIL captain's uniform. Standing firm, chin up defiantly, legs planted wide apart, his weapon drawn, with the cowering figures of Indo-European women and children seeking protection behind him. Some are clutching and mourning the bodies of slain family. The plaque commemorates *Bersiap* victims in Indonesia, and the Dutch armed forces who were sent to protect them. Every year, people flock to the monument to pay their respects. Former KNIL soldiers and their families are honoured. Westerling is remembered as a war hero.

Many people protest the statue. Demand it be removed, drench it in red paint. Journalists and activists in the Netherlands are asked for their opinions on the monument. Bonnie Triyana is invited to give comment representing Indonesian perspectives.[22] In Indonesia, no-one really cares. People are busy with the spectre of the New Order regime raising its ugly head again. The Westerling monument just confirms what they already know about Dutch violence in their revolution, and dubious attitudes in the Netherlands today.[23]

This possible future has its origin in actual events that are already behind us. In Prime Minister Mark Rutte's February 2022 apology, 'in the name of the government of the Netherlands, to the people of Indonesia … for the systematic and widespread extreme violence of the Dutch side in [the] years [1945–1949], and the subsequent looking away of previous cabinets'.[24] It came immediately in the wake of the summary findings of the large research project, funded by Rutte's government, called 'Independence, Decolonisation, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945–50', or ODGOI, following the Dutch acronym.[25]

Here are more things that actually happened. Eighteen months after Rutte's apology, in August 2023, it was approaching the annual *Indië Herdenking* on 15 August. This commemorates the end of World War Two and the end of the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia in 1945.[26] The mayor of Amsterdam, Femke Halsema, had excused herself from the commemorations in protest against the involvement of Westerling's daughter. Palmyra Westerling was supposed to

speak in support of her father's 'rehabilitation' (*eerherstel*). She had been invited by Peggy Stein, president of the lobby group Indisch Platform 2.0. Their agenda is 'backpay' for lost salaries and property to Dutch soldiers and civilians during the 41 months of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. They also work toward 'recognition of and apology for the improper treatment of the Dutch from the Dutch East Indies by the successive Dutch governments after WWII.'[27] This part of their agenda refers to the aggressive assimilation policies that Indo-Europeans and Indonesians were subjected to in the Netherlands in the first decades after the war.

Stein was interviewed on the national broadcaster NOS in the lead-up to the Amsterdam commemorations about her intention to support Westerling's rehabilitation. She spoke of her mother's Indo-European family, who were persecuted by Indonesian militias in Sulawesi as part of the *Bersiap* there. 'Bersiap!' is Indonesian for 'watch out' or 'get ready', the warning cry associated with the advance of Indonesian fighters on civilians in late 1945 and early 1946 during the power vacuum following the Japanese surrender to Allied forces. Stein maintained that without Westerling's actions more of her community would have been murdered. 'But the fact that "all sides" committed atrocities does not mean that the atrocities committed by "our" [the Dutch] side ... deserves rehabilitation? Or do you think that other atrocities also deserve rehabilitation?", the interviewer asked. 'I believe that everything deserves rehabilitation', Stein answered.[28]

Given that Westerling was never deemed a war criminal by a court of law, calls for his rehabilitation actually articulate a grievance rather than a miscarriage of justice. His apologists object not to his record, but to his moral condemnation. They object to the shame they argue follows from his disgrace by historians, and to the demoralising effect on public understandings of the Dutch past that follow. We can see this most clearly when Westerling's supporters agitate for the right to remember him with pride. At stake is how Westerling and, by extension, the Dutch war in Indonesia, should be judged and remembered—as the work of heroes, not war criminals—and how Dutch people should feel about him and other ex-combatants. Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory is also useful here. It sheds light on this strategic cooperation in a 'malleable discursive space [where] groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others'.[29] Jonathan Flatley has recently argued that implicatedness frequently produces a 'political feeling' that leads to backlash, particularly when the historic and contemporary privilege or superiority of certain groups is under pressure.[30] Shame is a particularly powerful political affect.

A revolt against shame—over Westerling, over the Netherlands' war in Indonesia during its fight for independence, and over how Dutch veterans of that war should be remembered—underpins the political discourse around Westerling's rehabilitation. 'In the context of the time the man was an absolute hero', far-right politician Wybren van Haga stated in the June 2023 second Parliamentary Debate over the ODGOI results. 'That is something that we can be hugely proud of.'[31] According to one veteran, the effect of revisionist histories of the Dutch war in Indonesia has been to 'undermin[e] any sense of national self-worth'. [32] This veteran has denounced the 'self-flagellation' he sees in the Netherlands today about its war in Indonesia. He mounts the familiar argument that historians of Dutch colonialism should not judge the deeds of the past by the standards of the present. This recurring fallacy is easily exposed by the ultimate challenge to the colonial 'standard'—the very premise of the Indonesian war of independence itself. Millions of people politically and militarily asserted their right to self-determination and opposed the reimposition of Dutch rule after World War Two. The gathering of international forces at the United Nations in favour of Indonesian independence throughout the late 1940s further undermines the concept of an undisputed 'standard of the time'.

Westerling's exclusion from the canon of Dutch war heroes resonates, to his defenders, with the lot of *all* returned soldiers in the 1950s. The defence of Westerling is held so dear by his apologists because, if his reputation can be rehabilitated, then so too can that of ordinary veterans who are implicated in the 'extreme violence' for which Rutte's government apologised. To rehabilitate Westerling is to acquit Dutch guilt and implication altogether.

Westerling also binds activists from Indies-diaspora groups with veterans in another way: through interdependent discourses of trauma. Dutch veterans need traumatised civilians to give the colonial war they fought its legitimacy. For Dutch authorities from late 1945 onward, the *Bersiap* constituted a key justification for military intervention, to protect their subjects from 'terrorists'. Vice versa, some Indies-diaspora activists seem to believe they need honourable veterans who rescued them from the *Bersiap* and thus spared them further trauma.

It was historian Elsbeth Locher-Scholten who first noted a trend toward 'psychologisation' in Dutch war commemorations during the 1980s, by which she meant 'a growing recognition of *shared* suffering' and trauma that relied on collapsing the experiences of the Japanese occupation together with those of the Indonesian Revolution. This had not always been the case. In the late 1960s, when the first large-scale reunions of war veterans and civilian survivors were organised, heroism and endurance were emphasised, not trauma.[33] Since the 1990s, an enormous amount of labour has been poured into the task of having the trauma of Dutch veterans of the war in Indonesia recognised.

Wartime experiences of suffering are a shared foundational narrative for many Indies-diaspora communities. Participation in May 4 and 5 commemorations (Remembrance Day and Liberation Day) as well as the Indië Herdenking on 15 August are important annual events. For the first generation of emigrants, the pressure to assimilate, the traumatic experience of the Japanese occupation during World War Two, and the *Bersiap* during the Indonesian Revolution, pressed many into a traumatised silence (*Indisch zwijgen*).[34] The third generation is far more inclined toward breaching familial silences and reclaiming their 'roots' in Indonesia.[35] The experience of Dutch Jews during the Holocaust and the language of intergenerational trauma—a legacy of Holocaust studies—strongly resonates with the self-representations of the third generation of Indo-Europeans in the Netherlands.[36]

Dutch ex-combatants are the other group who claim to have been traumatised first by fighting in the Indonesian War of Independence, and then by the public suppression in the Netherlands of that war's memory.[37] I am going to make a detour into work on veterans and trauma here. This group's claims are linked to a global (or perhaps western) phenomenon, the emergence of the psychiatric condition of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).[38] PTSD was first established as a diagnostic category in 1980 as a direct result of therapeutic work with American veterans of the Vietnam War (1965–75). This new concept 'overturned almost a century of suspicion that traumatised individuals … had a pre-existing mental or physical weakness'.[39] After the Vietnam War, veterans' symptoms of depression, anxiety and various kinds of 'repetition compulsion'—flashbacks, dreams and intrusive memories—became the grounds for a new focus on the traumatic potential of any shocking event.[40] The rise in veterans' activism in the Netherlands during the 1980s, and the growing public discourse of their pain and suffering during the 1990s,[41] coincides with the international mainstreaming of PTSD in public understandings of the effects of war.

It is important to distinguish between how some Dutch veterans tap into a *generalised* discourse of trauma as opposed to a more particular kind of affliction they seem not to want to identify with. 'Perpetrator trauma', gained by committing violence, has developed out of further work on ex-

combatants with PTSD. The burgeoning field of 'perpetrator studies' has been important for pushing beyond the caricatures of monsters and psychopaths to analyse how wrongdoing is socially conditioned.[42] The concept 'recognises trauma as a neutral, human trait, divorced from morality, and not incompatible with choice and agency.' It affects the strong as well as the vulnerable and, on a psychological level, decouples trauma from victimhood.[43]

Unlike PTSD, perpetrator trauma has no clinical diagnostic status. Rather, it is an interdisciplinary concept that rests on the notion of 'moral injury', developed in the 1990s to explain 'the violation of personal moral codes in the line of duty'. This includes a range of scenarios, from witnessing or participating in inhumane acts, to failure to prevent them from happening.[44] 'Perpetrator trauma' has not entered the mainstream lexicon because it struggles to garner 'an imaginative support community' in the same way as victim-based understandings of trauma.[45] If perpetrators suffer as a result of their crimes, it is widely seen as a fitting punishment.[46] It only takes a quick thought experiment that I daresay all of you will be familiar with to see why:

Does anyone commemorate former Nazi death camp prison guards, members of the SS or indeed, your average German Wehrmacht veteran, who may have suffered from 'perpetrator trauma'? Does it shift the burden of their responsibility, or the suffering of their victims?

In the Netherlands especially, where narratives of Dutch and, more recently, Jewish suffering during the German occupation and Holocaust are deeply ingrained in public war commemorations, extending remembrance of post-war suffering to former Nazis would cause a revolt. Introducing the concept of 'perpetrator trauma' into mainstream discussions of Dutch veterans is therefore almost impossible.[47]

Westerling himself never complained of trauma. Searching his memoir for traces of transformative suffering or remorse for his crimes turns up nothing but egotism and grandiose claims about his unrecognised genius.[48] Neither does his daughter, Palmyra Westerling, claim her father was traumatised by his experiences in Sulawesi or elsewhere. Similarly, despite the words 'painful' and 'trauma' in the title of Bauke Geersing's book, *The Painful Farwell from the Indies Archipelago: Trauma—Discussion—Rehabilitation*, only one chapter addresses the topic of post-straumatic stress in veterans. Geersing, an amateur historian with no formal qualifications in history or any cognate discipline, has written monographs denouncing the revisionist histories leading up to the ODGOI results, and pursued individual historians for work that he disagrees with through vexatious academic misconduct charges.[49] Veteran Gerard van der Lee wrote in Geersing's book about 'thousands of service personnel [who are] physically and internally wounded', who 'returned mutilated'.[50] He then plead for a solution. 'The Netherlands should just be proud of her soldiers. The soldiers from then until now!'[51] No contributors discuss moral injury and certainly not perpetrator trauma. Rather, the book is an outpouring of indignity and outrage, a 374-page labour in shifting shame to pride about the Dutch military in Indonesia's revolution.

Christina Twomey, a cultural historian of war, explains how trauma enhances public participation in war commemoration by giving emotional access to the 'reality' of the past, even to the extent that 'emotion can be a substitute for experience'. 'The trauma of the survivor', in these conditions, 'becomes the authentic conduit to th[e] past'. 'The older language of manhood, glory and heroism did not allow for the same degree of identification; trauma, through the very breadth of its definition, is something anyone can experience.' Crucially, Twomey points out that empathetic identification with trauma can also make it difficult to 'engage in critical dialogue', since it construes challenges to trauma-based narratives as 'an act of disrespect or insensitivity

rather than scholarly enquiry.' Once announced, the claim of 'trauma' tends to stifle contradiction and shut down debate. [52]

Public empathy for war trauma victims is a relatively recent historical phenomenon that is arguably linked to states adaptively manufacturing ongoing consent for war. Implicitly, and for practical purposes, militaries and state veterans' services *must* acknowledge perpetrator trauma as a matter of human resource management and recruitment. Optimally, professional soldiers should be deployed more than once and should not be permanently damaged by combat stress. Militaries also need to acknowledge a PTSD diagnosis for disabled veterans to receive welfare and reintegrate into civilian society.[53] The lessons of decolonisation have been well taken by western states.

The political labour of shifting public emotions around memories of the Dutch war in Indonesia from shame to pride represents an opportunity that contemporary governments and the military in the Netherlands cannot ignore, and that undoubtedly informed Mark Rutte including an apology, in 2022, to Dutch veterans and their supporters. '[W]e should note', Rutte said, 'that apologies from the Cabinet are for everyone in *our* country who has had to live with the consequences of the colonial war in Indonesia. Often up until this day. And that covers *all* groups. Including the veterans who conducted themselves as good soldiers at the time.'[54]

Veterans of the war in Indonesia get 'one day' per year to be celebrated, one retired Dutch colonel has observed with rancour. 'The rest of the year they are left to themselves and repeatedly criticised in the mainstream media for their service'.[55] One ex-military contributor to Bauke Geersing's book was not afraid to say the quiet part out loud. 'Who is still prepared to do something extra for a country that is filled with shame?'[56] Comparative studies of veterans' politics show that states can ill afford to neglect a large group of disaffected ex-combatants after conflict, not least because veterans typically outnumber the dead.[57]

IV.
Other Possible Futures

It has been argued that 'only 25 per cent' of Dutch soldiers fought on the front line against Indonesians in their war of independence, and therefore very few can be guilty of war crimes or atrocity.[58] Those numbers may be correct, but they distract from an inconvenient truth. If ex-combatants in Dutch forces were *not* implicated in the attempted reconquest of Indonesia between 1945 and 1949, then the violence that resulted in the deaths of 100,000 Indonesians *just happened to them*. Their deaths in a war designed to stop Indonesia from achieving its independence had nothing to do with service personnel in engineering corps supporting Dutch military supply and communication lines. With women members of the KNIL who worked in offices and other non-combatants roles behind the frontlines. With navy personnel blockading Indonesian waters and doing coastal bombardments. With air force personnel dropping Dutch paratroopers, supplies and doing aerial bombardments. With embedded photographers and members of the 'welfare service' whose job it was to create propaganda to sustain Dutch and international support for the Dutch war. Or with Dutch storm troopers, special forces, or intelligence services. In other words, Indonesian causalities in the war they were forced into against the Dutch had nothing to do with the full suite of combatant and non-combatant services that a fully mobilised military uses in wartime—not to mention, the largest armed force the Netherlands has ever committed to war in its history.

Many Dutch conscripts and volunteers alike shared in a political belief that their deployment was just. Copious evidence in ego documents demonstrates that ex-soldiers did not fundamentally question the premise of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, during or even after the war.[59] To defend and reinstate Dutch colonial rule on the grounds that Indonesians were incapable of self-rule was a widespread belief in the Netherlands and among the colonial ruling class. Combined with a longer history in which colonial violence was normalised, not only in war but also across the judiciary, the penal system, in plantation agriculture, and in epistemic modes, it becomes impossible to avoid the implication of a majority of Dutch veterans, civilian society and the multi-ethnic colonial ruling class in the foundations for the colonial and anti-colonial violence that played out in Indonesia in the 1940s.

Atrocities against civilians in wartime are a form of collective suffering whose memory requires no augmentation to be mourned and condemned. *Bersiap* survivors and their families do not need Westerling or Dutch veterans to legitimise their trauma. Rather, it would appear to be the other way around. Westerling's supporters benefit from a partisan interpretation of 'protection' that distracts from the fundamental injustice of the Dutch war against Indonesians seeking independence.

For members of the diaspora with family ties to the former Netherlands East Indies, there is nothing in the traumatic experience of either the *Bersiap* or the Japanese occupation before it *that cancels out* their simultaneous implication as beneficiaries of longer histories of colonialism. This is especially the case for civilians who had been members of the colonial ruling class with power over Indonesians. In addition, European, Indo-European and Moluccan members of the KNIL were indisputably responsible for the violent military oppression and subjugation of Indonesians under Dutch colonialism from the KNIL's inception in the early nineteenth century up until the Japanese occupation in 1942.[60] The same is true for all participants—conscripts and volunteers alike—in the military project of Dutch recolonisation after the declaration of Indonesian independence in August 1945. Michael Rothberg's work demonstrates that 'complex implication'—which I suggest applies to members of all these groups—can and does 'attach to people who have had shattering experiences of trauma', 'with lines of direct or indirect connection to histories of both victimization and perpetration.'[61]

The interlocking logic of trauma and heroes can be unravelled. We can condemn the abject failure of both Indonesian revolutionaries and Dutch soldiers to protect civilians in the war of the late 1940s. We can do that without recourse to claiming the 'right' of the Dutch government to protect its 'subjects' in its former colony by launching military actions. We can dispense with the 'just war' myth while remembering the injustice of atrocities against everyone caught in the crossfire of social revolution and colonial war. And we can acknowledge the inescapable responsibility of members of the Dutch armed forces for taking part in an unjust war, as some Dutch veterans—at the time of the revolution itself, and in subsequent decades—have demonstrated in their own words.

Thanks

I am grateful to the Executive Board of the VU and the Dean and Faculty Board of the Humanities for granting me the honour of this chair. I could not have dreamed a more inspiring predecessor, Susan Legêne, and I thank her too for being among the first to welcome me here. I have been extremely fortunate to land among such a fine group of historians and colleagues as I have here at the VU. Pepijn Brandon, Inger Leemans, my office neighbour Bas ter Haar Romeny, Lucas Poy, Jonathan Singerton, Chiel van den Akker, Erika Kuijpers, Wim Manuhutu,

Norah Karrouche, Dienke Hondius and my head of department, Gert-Jan Burgers, warrant special mention for making this an exceptionally collegial, stimulating and warm environment.

I want to thank my mentors, peers, PhD students and collaborators along the way, starting with those in Australia. My PhD supervisor, Jean Gelman Taylor, who is still sometimes the voice in my head. Robert Aldrich, Susan Broomhall, Jeremy Martens, Alistair Thomson, Jane Lydon, Kate McGregor, Matt Fitzpatrick, Agnieszka Sobocinska, Ruth Morgan, Claire Spivakoski and Bernard Keo are scholars who have provided me intellectual rigour, moral inspiration and cherished friendship. I want to thank Karen Strassler in New York, Kim Wagner in London and Daniel Foliard in Paris for the same. Here in the Netherlands, I want to thank first Melle van Maanen, who has become a formidable and mischievous collaborator. Special thanks to Marieke Bloembergen and Tom van den Berge, both of whom I have known since I was a PhD student, and whose intellectual example, friendship and humour I am very grateful for. Thanks also to Henk Schulte Nordholt and David Kloos from KITLV Leiden.

My very dear friend Liesbeth Ouwehand is in a category all her own. We met at KITLV more than twenty years ago, and immediately clicked over photography from Indonesia, museums and shopping. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all our wonderful conversations and journeys together. I also want to thank my dear friend, Amelia Liu, in Melbourne. And my mum and my sister Tanja, who are on the other side of the world watching the livestream from Sydney. Thank you for your love and support. You are both my inspiration for your resilience, love and humour. Terima kasih banyak Teguh, aku sayang sekali kamu. And finally, to my beloved Henry, my son. I have no words adequate for saying here what you mean to me. It is for you that I strive to be the best person I can and leave something good behind.

Ik heb gezegd.

Endnotes

[1] Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge University Press 2016); Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Penguin 2020); Bernard Z. Keo, *Imagining Malaya: Peranakan Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Belonging at the End of Empire, 1945–1957* (Oxford University Press 2025).
[2] Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger, or Royal Netherlands Indies Army.
[3] ' Dan Westerling Pun Tersenyum', *Historia.Id*, 13 September 2023, https://www.historia.id/article/dan-westerling-pun-tersenyum-DE3Zd (accessed 10 July 2025).
[4] Susie Protschky and Melle van Maanen, 'Trauma, implication and the politics of victimhood in the Netherlands after war in Indonesia (1945–9)', *History, Memory and Conflict* (forthcoming 2025).
[5] Pepijn Brandon, 'The Coen paradox: The violence of Dutch commerce' in Wendeline Flores, Wayne Modest and Ilaria Obata (eds), *Our Colonial Inheritance* (Lannoo + Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, 2023), 126-39.
[6] To paraphrase the infamous quote of former Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, in 2016: Peter Groenendijk, 'Balkenende geloofd nog steeds in VOC-mentaliteit', *AD*, 30-10-2106, https://www.ad.nl/rotterdam/balkenende-gelooft-nog-steeds-in-voc-mentaliteit~a76d00a3/?cb=7ac44329-0ae5-487e-ace5-4958dbdd46c2&auth_rd=1 (accessed 9 September 2025).
[7] Brandon, 'The Coen paradox', 129.

[8] Thanks to Harm Stevens for bringing this to my attention. Van Heutsz (1851–1973) was Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies (1904–9) and before that held several high-ranking positions in the KNIL and as military governor of Aceh during the Aceh War.
[9] Timoteus Anggawan Kusno in Caroline Ha Thuc and Timoteus Anggawan Kusno, 'On artistic research and the Centre for Tanah Runcuk Studies: A conversation between Caroline Ha Thuc and Timoteus Anggawan Kusno', *Fever Dream: A Solo Exhibition by Timoteus Anggawan Kusno* (Srisasanti Syndicate Yogyakarta 2024), 48-65 (58).
[10] J.A. de Moor, *Westerling's Oorlog. Indonesië 1945–1950* (Balans 1999).
[11] *Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Justitie: Onderzoek naar excessen in Indonesië (1945–1969)*, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, 2.09.95, inv. nr. 139.
[12] NL-HaNA, Justitie/Excessen, 2.09.05, inv. nr.129; Collection MJ Latumahina, Moluks Historisch Museum.
[13] De Moor, *Westerling's Oorlog*, 406-8.
[14] KITLV Collections, Leiden University Library Special Collections, Or 27.833 Album 1.
[15] See the sentencing records from the Dutch investigation into the APRA coup: NL-HaNA, Justitie/Excessen, 2.09.05, inv. nrs. 129, 130. Thanks also to Esther Zwinkels for clarifying this point.
[16] He was spirited out by the marines on 22 February 1950: De Moor, *Westerling's Oorlog*, 493-5.
[17] Thanks to VU Amsterdam University Historian Ab Flipse for locating a hard copy in the VU archives (since the paper is not digitised on Delpher).
[18] Henriëtte C. de Wit, 'Wij zagen de "actie Westerling"'. *De Spiegel*, 18 February 1950, No 21, 10-13 (13).
[19] De Moor, *Westerling's Oorlog*, 514-19.
[20] Susie Protschky, 'Rethinking histories of military atrocity, ethnic violence and photography, from the Aceh War to the Indonesian national revolution' in Sadiah Boonstra, Bronwyn Anne Beech Jones, Katharine McGregor, Ken M.P. Setiawan and Abdul Wahid (eds), *Rethinking Histories of Indonesia: Experiencing, Resisting and Renegotiating Coloniality* (ANU Press 2025), 145-77.
[21] Parts of Sections III and IV of this lecture are extracted (with permission from Melle van Maanen) from Protschky and Van Maanen, 'Trauma, implication and the politics of victimhood'.
[22] Bonnie Triyana is founder of the popular Indonesian history media company *Historia.ID*, founder of the Multatuli Museum in Rangkasbitung, and now politician. He is renowned in the Netherlands, among other things, for arguing that focuing on the *Bersiap* in the Netherlands occludes atrocities against other minorities during the Revolution: link to NRC article: Bonnie Triyana, 'Schrap de term "Bersiap" want die is racistisch', *NRC* 10 January 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/01/10/schrap-term-bersiap-voor-periodisering-want-die-is-racistisch-a4077367 (accessed 10 July 2025).
[23] Randy Wirayudha, 'Thierry Baudet: Harusnya Indonesia Masih Jajahan Belanda', *Historia.Id*, 15 June 2023, https://www.historia.id/article/thierry-baudet-harusnya-indonesia-masih-jajahan-belanda-Dp9An (accessed 10 July 2025); Hendri F. Isnaeni, 'CIA Ungkap Peristiwa APRA Westerling', *Historia.Id*, 19 July 2020, https://www.historia.id/article/cia-ungkap-peristiwa-apra-westerling-DAda1 (accepted 10 July 2025); Lizzy van Leeuwen, 'Geert Wilders dan Balas Dendamnya', *Historia.Id*, 13 March 2017, https://www.historia.id/article/geert-wilders-dan-balas-dendamnya-P4WXm (accessed 10 July 2025).
[24] 'Rutte: diepe excuses voor structureel geweld in Indonesië', *NOS Nieuws,* Thursday 17 February 2022.
https://nos.nl/artikel/2417780-rutte-diepe-excuses-voor-structureel-geweld-in-indonesie (accessed 10 July 2025).
[25] See https://www.niod.nl/en/projects/independence-decolonization-violence-and-war-indonesia-1945-1950 (accessed 10 July 2025).
[26] Officially, the *Nationale Herdenking 15 augustus 1945*.
[27] See their website, https://deindischekwestie.nl/ (accessed 13 July 2025).

[28] *Nieuwsuur NPO Start*, 9-8-2023, https://tvblik.nl/nieuwsuur/9-augustus-2023 (accessed 10 July 2025).
[29] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 5.
[30] Jonathan Flatley, 'On implicatedness as a political feeling', *Parallax*, 29:3 (2023), 386-97 (388).
[31] Wybren van Haga, *Debat over onderzoeksprogramma ODGOI*, 14-06-2023: 93-6-20.
[32] P.L.J. Loukes, 'Optocht der Flagellanten' in Bauke Geersing (ed.), *Het Pijnlijke Afscheid van de Archipel. Trauma—Discussie—Eerherstel*, 58-65 (60).
[33] Vincent J.H. Houben, 'A torn soul: The Dutch public discussion of the colonial past in 1995', *Indonesia* 63 (1997): 47-66 (57). My emphasis. In the 1980s, when the commemorations on 15 August were inaugurated, speeches acknowledged the psychological damage caused by war and the cultivation of an identity 'based on war experiences and loss of country'. Veterans who had lost the war in Indonesia were blamed for having fought for the wrong cause and faced low wages or unemployment.
[34] Houben, 'A torn soul', 48.
[35] See, for example, Lala Bohang and Lara Nuberg, *In haar voetsporen* (ROSE Stories 2020); Liang de Beer (red.), *Model verhalen: Reflecties op Aziatische Roots* (Mazirel Pers 2024); Julia Doornbos and Ana Dragojlovic, '"The past should not affect the children": Intergenerational hauntings in the homes of Indo- European families', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 29:8, (2022) 1141-161, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2021.1950644; Ana Dragojlovic, 'The Search for Sensuous Geographies of Absence: Indisch Mediation of Loss', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 170 (2014) 473–503; Ana Dragojlovic, 'Affective silences: Violence, heteropatriarchy, intergenerationality', *American Anthropologist* 2023 DOI: 10.1111/aman.13920.
[36] See, for example, Miko Flohr, '"En wij dan?". Het dekolonisatieonderzoek en de postkoloniale ontheemden', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 136:3 (2023): 269-270. doi: https://doi.org/10.5117/tVg2023.3.007.FLoh. Iris Van Ooijen and Ilse Raaijmakers, 'Competative or multidirectional memory? The interaction between postwar and postcolonial memory in the Netherlands', *Journal of Genocide Research,* 14:3-4 (2012): 463-83 (408, 466).
[37] Stef Scagliola, *Last van het oorlog. De Nederlandse oorlogsmisdaden in Indonesië en hun nawerking* (Balans 2002).
[38] Hans Pols and MS Micale, 'Introduction' in MS Micale MS and Hans Pols (edds), *Traumatic Pasts in Asia: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma from the 1930s to the Present* (Berghahn 2023), 1-34 (3, 6).
[39] Christina Twomey, 'Trauma and the reinvigoration of Anzac: An argument', *History Australia* 10:3 (2013): 85–108 (106) https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2013.11668482; TT Ngô and Đ Nguyên, 'War dead, trauma, and care: The differential reintegration of Vietnamese former combatants, *War & Society* 43:4 (2024): 382–97.
https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2024.2375884.
[40] Saira Mohamed, 'Of monsters and men: Perpetrator trauma and mass atrocity', *Columbia Law Review* 115:5 (2015): 1157–216 (1196).
[41] Protschky, 'Soldiers as humanitarians', 55-7.
[42] Bart Nauta, Injured fighters: Traumatisation and contention in post-colonial states. *War & Society* 43:4 (2024): 411–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2024.2375882.
[43] Mohamed, 'Of monsters and men', 1170-2.
[44] M. van den Berg and J Grimell, 'Trauma, nostalgia and redemption among veterans in homecoming film', in L. van Liere and S. Sremac (eds), *Trauma and Nostalgia: Practices in Memory and Identity* (Amsterdam University Press 2024), 115–38.
https://doi.org/10.5117/9789048559220
120; Mohamed, 'Of monsters and men', 1171.
[45] R. Morag, 'Perpetrator trauma and current Israeli documentary cinema', *Camera Obscura* 27:2 (2012): 93–132 (98, 125).
[46] Mohamed, 'Of monsters and men', 1164.

[47] For a notable attempt to do so, see Niels Mathijssen Mathijssen, 'De mannen met de geweren', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 49, 7 december 2022; and Niels Mathijssen, 'Over martelen denk je niet na, dat dóe je', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 49, 14 december 2022.
[48] Raymond Westerling, *Challenge to Terror* (London: William Kimber, 1952).
[49] Landelijk Orgaan Wetenschappelijke Integriteit, Advies 2021-16, https://lowi.nl/advies-2021-16/ (accessed 2 July 2025); see also Wouter Veraart, Marieke Borren and Caroline Drieënhuizen, 'Het recht wordt te vaak gebruikt om het redelijke debat te saboteren', *NRC*, 4 Februry 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/02/04/het-recht-wordt-te-vaak-gebruikt-om-het-redelijke-debat-te-saboteren-a4084369 (accessed 2 July 2025). See also Protschky and Van Maanen, 'Trauma, implication and the politics of victimhood'.
[50] G.F. van der Lee, 'Statement van een Indië-veteraan' in Bauke Geersing (ed.), *Het pijnlijke afscheid van de Indische archipel. Trauma – Discussie – Eerherstel* (Aspekt 2023), 302-305 at 303.
[51] Ibid, 305.
[52] Twomey, 'Trauma and the reinvigoration of Anzac', 91, 101, 107.
[53] Martin Crotty and Mark Edele (eds), *The Politics of Veterans' Benefits in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative History* (Cornell University Press 2020).
[54] Rutte, 'Diepe excuses voor structureel geweld in Indonesië'.
[55] 'Kolonel b.d. C.L. Brantz, 'De strij om de macht' in Bauke Geersing (ed.), *Het pijnlijke afscheid van de Indische archipel. Trauma – Discussie – Eerherstel* (Aspekt, 2023),155-82 (181).
[56] Kolonel drs P.J.L. Loukes, 'Optocht der flagellanten' in Bauke Geersing (ed.), *Het pijnlijke afscheid van de Indische archipel. Trauma–Discussie–Eerherstel* (Aspekt 2023), 58-65 at 60.
[57] Edele and Crotty, *The Politics of Veterans' Benefits in the Twentieth Century*; Peter Keppy, 'The making and taming of the veteran in 1950s Indonesia', *War & Society* 43:4 (2024): 364–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2024.2375881.
[58] Stef Scagliola, interview in *Selling a Colonial War* (Holland Harbour, 2023).
[59] Susie Protschky, 'Burdens of proof'.
[60] Susie Protschky, 'Rethinking histories'.
[61] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 163, 200, 202.