

# **Colonialism of Indonesia: A 438-Year Long Horror**

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To understand colonialism in Indonesia, we first need to understand why the Europeans needed to have colonies so far away from home. During the majority of Europe's history, it had depended on the "Silk Road" to be able to have access to spices from places like South and Southeast Asia. During the first half of the 15th century, the silk road connecting Asia to Europe was controlled by the Byzantine Empire. In 1453 however, the control of the route connecting Asia to Europe changed after the fall of Constantinople, replacing the Byzantine's rule of the route with the Ottoman Empire. Because the very Christian and Catholic nations of Europe didn't want to depend their spices on a non-Christian entity, they sought other alternatives. They did this by finding alternative spice routes by way of sea, this is what led to the general colonization of Africa, South America, and of course Southeast Asia.

The first Europeans to set sail to the archipelago (what is now Indonesia) were the Portuguese in 1512. The expedition of 1512 was originally about monopolizing the sources of valuable spices and to introduce Christianity through missionaries to the archipelago. The Portuguese established a few trading posts and bases throughout the archipelago, specifically in Ternate, Ambon, Solor, and others. However, due to Portuguese defeats by local native kingdoms, the Dutch (who at the time had also established a colony), and general failure to bring the local population into control, the Portuguese was the least influential European colonizer entity in the archipelago. The Portuguese were able to monopolize somewhat on the sea route from the archipelago to Europe, when they conquered Malacca in 1512.

The most well-known colonizers of the archipelago is, of course, the Dutch. The Dutch was, at first, getting its spices from the Portuguese (who at this time still had a monopoly on the spices in Indonesia). The Dutch were perfectly happy with this arrangement until they had a war with Spain, who had a dynastic union with Portugal. This made trading with Portugal for spices impossible for the Dutch. This led to the Dutch sailing to get the spices themselves in 1595. When the expedition crew returned to the Netherlands, the government recognized the potential of the spice trade. The government then merged other merchant companies into one single entity, the VOC. The first official Dutch colonial outpost was established in 1603 in Banten. The Dutch government gave the VOC autonomy to essentially act as its own government. The VOC was given autonomy to declare war, establish outposts and fortresses, sign diplomatic treaties, and even have its own army. The VOC steadily expanded throughout the rest of the archipelago by defeating local kingdoms, taking over cities, and defeating other colonial powers in the archipelago (Portuguese and British). The Dutch were a lot more successful than the Portuguese in subduing the local kingdoms, due to the Dutch not having as large of an empire as the Portuguese, and hence could invest more resources into the colonization of the archipelago. During the 18th century, the VOC started seeing financial troubles. Due to increased competition from other sources of spices, such as South America, the market for spices in the archipelago declined. This was worsened after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1775-1783). In the following years, the board of directors were thrown out, and the company was formally dissolved and liquidated in 1800, in which its remaining assets were formally nationalized and its privately-owned colony became a nationalized Dutch-owned colony.

The treatment of the natives of the archipelago is something that is very regularly talked about when discussions about colonialism in Indonesia are discussed. During Dutch rule, the VOC (and later the Dutch government) brutally ruled the people of the East Indies. The Dutch would acquire slaves for its plantations through either the slave market or by stealing them from the local population. The treatment of these slaves was extremely harsh. Slaves who weren't seen as working hard enough could be subjected to having either their ears, hands, breasts, noses, and other body parts cut off. Even worse punishments would be given out to slaves who attempted to escape, such as whippings, being burned alive, or even death. Female slaves were even forced to provide sexual services to their Dutch masters. The rape of slaves was a common occurrence during Dutch reign of the archipelago. During the 19th century, there was a growing criticism and dislike of slavery in Europe. This caused the Dutch to "officially abolish slavery, however this was only implemented in the richer areas of Java and Madura, and "unofficial" slavery continued well into the 20th century.

On the 8th of December 1941, the Dutch government (in exile) declared war on Japan. This led to the Japanese invading the Dutch East Indies in 1942, and gaining complete control by March of 1942. During the initial stages of Japanese occupation, most locals welcomed the Japanese as liberators from the European colonizers. Soekarno and Muhammad Hatta were even working with the Japanese during its occupation. Indonesian nationalist and independence movements were heavily favoring the transfer of rule from the Dutch to Japan, as Japan presented itself as the "Light of Asia". The native population would be sorely disappointed, as Japanese rule proved to be just as horrific as the European occupation. While the Japanese did appoint natives for positions of local government, the Japanese still used slaves from the local population to "help" in its war efforts against the allies. Many locals were forced into slavery and forced to work on military projects, in which many would die of poor treatment and starvation. The Japanese were also famous for its "comfort women", women from Japanese-controlled territories that were forced to work in prostitution and brothels.

As we all know, Indonesia did eventually gain its independence after a mixture of local independence movements and the allies weakening the Japanese overall, however this didn't mean the end of Indonesia's struggle against colonialism. Even after the Japanese defeat, the Dutch still proclaimed its sovereignty over Indonesia. This caused a prolonged war for independence of Indonesia from 1946 - 1949. During this time, many local villages were burned down, civilians massacred, and senseless violence among the local population was done by both the Dutch forces and even the Indonesian nationalist forces. The fighting finally ended on 27th September of 1949, after increasing pressure from the UN and back home in Europe, the Dutch finally formally recognized Indonesia as a state as the "United States of Indonesia" which was then replaced by the "Republic of Indonesia" in August of 1950, and all the territory in the archipelago would be joined into one single, independent, nation.

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