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Yuval Noah Harari

‘Utterly compelling’
*Financial Times*

‘Superb’
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# REVOLUSI

## Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World

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DAVID VAN REYBROUCK

*A Financial Times*, *Evening Standard*, *History Today* and *Prospect* Best Book of the Year

'An astounding feat of both research and storytelling. History at its best'
Yuval Noah Harari

'A magnificent fusion of oral history, sparkling analysis, and historical wisdom. *Revolusi* has it all: a masterpiece'
Sebastian Mallaby

'The story of [Indonesia's] formation is delivered in a manner that genuinely seems unsurpassable'
*History Today*, Books of the Year

'A majestic and beautifully written ode to revolution that aims to remind us of the immense significance of this period of history . . . compellingly written and marvellously translated'
*Times Literary Supplement*

'David Van Reybrouck's *Revolusi* is a major account of one of the most unlikely and astonishing sagas of decolonisation. A fully embodied chronicle that combines the skills of a journalist and a historian, the book is a towering achievement. It was the last chance to tell the story of the Indonesian revolution while some of its participants were still alive, and Van Reybrouck seized it'
Thomas Meaney

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‘Real history invariably resides in the memories of “ordinary people”. Among the book’s many gifts – the depth of its research, the breadth of its inquiries, the poetry of its prose – it is this that has affected me the most: the insistence and humility of finding and allowing these voices, these eyewitnesses to history, to come to the fore. With scientific meticulousness and a rare narrative brilliance, *Revolusi* gives us a history at once vast and intimate, a history in colour’
Laksmi Pamuntjak

‘History as it should be. Carried by a democracy of ordinary voices, meticulous research, an eye for decisive detail, vivid language and drama, Van Reybrouck forges a fantastic visionary compass to where history was heading at the time: the imagining of a new world order by people of colour’
Antjie Krog

‘A comprehensive, authoritative and highly readable history of Indonesia, with a focus on the crisis decade of the 1940s, from the Japanese invasion to liberation from Dutch rule in 1949. Seamlessly interwoven with hundreds upon hundreds of personal testimonies, Van Reybrouck’s narrative is a masterly display of the historian’s craft and a welcome corrective to the fiction that the Dutch in the East Indies were a benign force’
J. M. Coetzee

‘Passionate, rigourous, perceptive, powerful and highly readable. Van Reybrouk combines a historian’s clear analytic eye with a journalist’s joy at discovering and recounting the experiences of participants in great events. The Indonesian revolution, with all its complexity and horror and excitement and influence, comes alive. This is a magisterial and gripping account of events of urgent importance to us now’
Jason Burke

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‘Relating the story of this place is . . . a mammoth task, requiring a monumental research effort. This is what the Belgian historian David Van Reybrouck has achieved in his superb history, *Revolusi*’
*Guardian*

‘It’s often been said that Indonesia is the world’s largest “invisible country”. If that’s true, the revolution beginning in 1945 must surely be the most consequential “invisible revolution” of the last hundred years . . . compelling’
*History Today*

‘David Van Reybrouck’s immensely readable new history . . . fills an important gap . . . Van Reybrouck has visited just about every place that figures in Indonesia’s history, and evokes them with a narrative zest all too rare among historians’
Adam Hochschild, *Atlantic*

‘An electrifying narrative . . . The strength of Mr Van Reybrouck’s chronicle lies as much in the hundreds of interviews he conducted with very old participants in (and witnesses to) the war as in his impressive command of historical detail’
Tunku Varadarajan, *Wall Street Journal*

‘A wonderful and important book. David Van Reybrouck has written an authoritative and powerful history of Indonesia that not only reframes the birth of a nation but helps challenge ideas about the end of the European Age of Empire’
Peter Frankopan

‘A rare blend of formal daring, intellectual resourcefulness and journalistic fluency, *Revolusi* briskly ushers Indonesia onto the centre stage of modern history’
Pankaj Mishra

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‘An outstanding account of one nation’s unsung fight for freedom . . . The first-hand narratives are enthralling . . . [A] magnificent book’
Todd Kushner, *Washington Independent Review of Books*

‘The definitive account of a neglected epoch’
*The Economist*

‘An enthralling read . . . ambitious and magisterial in scope’
*International Affairs*

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## DAVID VAN REYBROUCK

David Van Reybrouck is the author of *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, which won twenty prizes, sold over half a million copies and has been translated into a dozen languages. His book *Against Elections* has been translated into more than twenty languages and has led to trials of participatory democracy throughout the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and elsewhere. His plays *Mission* and *Para* have been performed across Europe, and his novel *Zinc* won the European Book Prize 2017. *Revolusi* was first published in the Netherlands, where it was a major bestseller. David Van Reybrouck has been described as 'one of the leading intellectuals in Europe' (*Der Tagesspiegel*) and 'one of the most brilliant European intellectuals of the moment' (*Le Soir*). He is Belgian, writes in Dutch and is based in Brussels.

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## DAVID McKAY

David McKay's translations from the Dutch have been awarded the Vondel Prize and nominated for various international prizes. They include *Max Havelaar*, the scathing nineteenth-century critique of Dutch colonial misdeeds in the East Indies (co-translated with Ina Rilke), and the classic anti-colonial manifesto *We Slaves of Suriname* by Afro-Surinamese activist Anton de Kom.

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DAVID VAN REYBROUCK

# Revolusi

## Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World

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# Prologue

No waves, no billows, no breakers. The calm Java Sea splits the moonlight into a thousand oyster-white shards that bob gently on the dark water. A mild northeast breeze brings some relief, but as always when the monsoon winds change direction, the heat lingers until after midnight, even at sea. Millions of stars sparkle in the firmament; the Milky Way is a swipe of chalk on a blackboard.

From the distance comes a faint thrumming, barely audible at first, but the sound intensifies, coming closer, now a distinct throbbing, an ever louder pounding – until it turns into a forceful, regular thumping. And in the moonlight, the unmistakable form of a steamship surges into view, a majestic white colossus parting the waters with her ramrod prow. Her masts, derricks and decks announce that this is a packet ship, carrying both passengers and freight. The broad funnel trails a horizontal wisp of smoke like a pennant. Now and then the stack disgorges a shower of red sparks; the stokers in the boiler room are raking the live coals. But the sparks soon fizzle in the open air, and the packet glides on through the lead-blue waters of the night.

The ship is listing to starboard a little, not much – she's just carrying a heavy load. But the angle of list is increasing, the vessel tilting further and further off centre. On the lower decks, the passengers look around in fright. Then the whistle sounds, six short blasts, one long: abandon ship. And again, and again.

Now everything happens fast. A few deck passengers rush out onto the promenade. Not everyone has a life jacket, and it's hard to assemble when the deck has become a slope. Stokers and trimmers are making their way up the steep ladders, but which way *is* up? The people on deck cling to pipes, cables, chains and ropes. Those who lose their grip slide down the deck, slam into the rail and fall, broken, into the sea. A shriek of terror, the crunch of impact, a cry of agony and then the splash.

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A few minutes later, the ship keels over, her funnel smacking into the sea. She chokes, spurts water, takes in more and then suffocates in a death rattle of steam, soot, coal and salt. The big bronze propeller, half submerged, slows to an inglorious halt. The large flag that flew so proudly from the stern now floats on the dark water.

The once-mighty vessel lies on her side in the sea among the drowning people. Because the dynamo is on the port side, now facing up, many electric lights on deck keep blazing until the packet's final descent to the seabed. Glaring bulbs on a sinking ship. Brightly lit decks, wet coils of rope, a short circuit crackling. Then only bubbles rising to the surface.

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# Chapter 1

## The VOC Mentality
*Why Indonesia wrote world history*

It was the loudest explosion I'd ever heard. I was at work in my hotel along Jalan Wahid Hasyim, a street in the centre of Jakarta, when from down the road came what sounded like a huge thunderclap. But the morning sky was a steely blue, as it had been the day before and the day before that. Had a lorry exploded? A gas tank? From my window, I couldn't see a plume of smoke anywhere, but my modest little hotel looked out over just one small corner of the city. Jakarta, with ten million inhabitants, is a sprawling megalopolis covering almost 700 square kilometres; if you count its satellite cities, the population is no less than thirty million.

Five minutes later Jeanne called, in a total panic. It seemed so unlike her. We'd met six months earlier at a language course in Yogyakarta. She was a young French freelance journalist and one of the most relaxed travellers I had encountered. Jeanne was based in Jakarta and, at that very moment, on her way to my hotel. We planned to spend the day visiting retirement homes in outlying districts, in search of eyewitnesses to history. She would interpret for me, as she had before. But now she was in tears. 'There's been an attack! I had to run from the shooting, and I'm hiding in the mall around the corner from you!'

Out into the street. The usual endless honking traffic had been replaced by a crowd of hundreds and hundreds. Multitudes of the city's poor were holding up their smartphones to film the scene. Four hundred metres further, at the crossroads of my street and Jalan Thamrin, Jakarta's central traffic artery, we saw a dead body on the ground – a man on his back, recently killed. His feet pointed into the air, an unnatural sight. Policemen and soldiers were holding back

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the crowd. The situation was not yet under control. On the pavement to my left, I saw Jeanne approaching. We stared at the scene in disbelief, hugged and rushed back to my hotel room. Today would not be about the 1930s and 40s.

The attacks of 14 January 2016 were the first in Jakarta in seven years. Members of an extremist Muslim group had driven up to a police post and opened fire. A bomb had gone off near a Burger King and a Starbucks – the bang I'd heard – and then two of the terrorists had blown themselves up in a car park. You can still find videos online. There were embassies, luxury hotels and a major United Nations office nearby, but we would later learn that those had not been direct targets. Eight people were killed, including four attackers, and twenty-four were injured.

Once Jeanne had recovered from the shock, she went straight to work. She wrote press releases for lots of French newspapers and websites, and she kept up with the latest news on my television so that she could send updates to Paris. We trawled the internet in every language we knew. By then I had made a few posts to social media, and the first newspapers and radio stations were calling for information and interviews. For the rest of the day, the hotel room became the nerve centre feeding information to the French, Belgian, Swiss and, to a lesser extent, Dutch media. (The Netherlands still has a few correspondents of its own in Jakarta.) I remember that at one stage Jeanne sat down on the carpet in the hotel corridor for a radio interview with France Inter, while I was talking live to a Flemish television channel on Skype. We went on without a break until late afternoon, by which time we both had splitting headaches and decided to stop for lunch.

The next day, it was all over.

As soon as it became clear that this was not an attack like the one in Bali in 2002 (which left 200 dead, mostly Westerners) or a tsunami like the one in Aceh in 2004 (which took 131,000 lives), international interest ran dry. Indonesia once again became the quiet giant you rarely if ever hear about outside Southeast Asia. It's a very peculiar thing, really – in population, it's the world's fourth-largest country after China, India and the United States, which are all in the news

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constantly. It has the largest Muslim community on earth. Its economy is Southeast Asia's biggest, and it supplies large parts of the world with palm oil, rubber and tin. But the international community just doesn't seem interested. It's been that way for years. In a quality bookshop in Paris, Beijing or New York, it's easier to find books about Myanmar, Afghanistan, Korea and even Armenia (countries with tens of millions of inhabitants or fewer) than Indonesia with its population of 268 million. One out of every twenty-seven humans is Indonesian, but the rest of the world would have a hard time naming even one of the country's inhabitants. Or, in the words of a classic expat joke, 'Any idea where Indonesia is?' 'Uh . . . not really. Somewhere near Bali?'

Let's start with a quick glance at the world map. Indonesia's place on the margins of that map reflects its marginal role in our image of the world: that mess on the lower right, that splatter of islands between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, apparently that's it. It's far away from compact Western Europe and massive North America, which are at the top – a historical convention, of course, since the surface of the earth has no centre and the cosmos no up or down. But if you shift the perspective and put Indonesia in the centre, you realise this is not some dusty corner of the world, but a strategically located archipelago in a vast maritime region between India and China. For seafarers in ages past, the islands made perfect stepping stones between East and West: a double row, mostly growing smaller further to the east. The Malay Peninsula practically rubs shoulders with colossal Sumatra in the southern row, and then there are Java, Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Flores and so on. The northern row consists of Borneo, Sulawesi and the Moluccas, which are massive, spindly and fragmented, respectively. The two strings of beads converge at New Guinea.

Indonesia is the world's largest island realm. Officially, it is made up of 13,466 islands, but it could also be 16,056. Or 18,023. No one knows exactly. Volcanoes, earthquakes and tides are constantly transforming the coastlines, and when the waters rise the number of islands increases. Once I witnessed it myself: the middle of a tropical

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Map 1: Contemporary Indonesia (2020)




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island disappeared for six hours at high tide. Were those two islands or one? Two, by the UN definition, but the locals had only one name for the place. Of those countless islands, only a few thousand are inhabited. Although most are tiny, Indonesia includes five of the world's thirteen largest islands: New Guinea, Borneo, Sumatra, Sulawesi and Java. The first two are shared with Papua New Guinea, Malaysia and Brunei; the last is the most populous island on earth. Java is about 1,000 kilometres long and 100 to 200 kilometres wide, only seven per cent of Indonesia's total land area, but its 141 million inhabitants make up more than half the population. No wonder so many historic changes began there. But Indonesia is more than Java. The whole tropical archipelago covers more than forty-five degrees of longitude, an eighth of the globe, spanning three time zones and more than 5,000 kilometres along the equator. If you could click on Indonesia and drag it over to Europe on the map, it would start in Ireland and end somewhere in Kazakhstan. Superimposed on a map of the United States, it extends almost a thousand kilometres out to sea on either side. That immense area is inhabited by nearly 300 distinct ethnic groups speaking 700 languages, but the official language is Indonesian, a young language derived from Malay with countless traces of Dutch, English, Portuguese and Arabic.

But these demographic and geographical superlatives are not the only things that merit our attention. Indonesian history includes an unprecedented event of global significance: it was the first country to declare independence after World War II. This milestone came less than two days after Japan capitulated. After almost 350 years of Dutch presence (1600–1942) and a three-and-a-half-year Japanese occupation (1942–5), a few local leaders announced that their archipelago would go forward as a sovereign state. It was the first domino to fall, at a time when much of Asia, Africa and the Arab world remained in the hands of a few Western European states such as Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal.

The bold swiftness of this declaration, the Proklamasi, reflects its origins in the struggle of a very young generation. The Revolusi – the Indonesian war of independence that began in 1945 – was in every respect a youth revolution, supported and defended by a whole

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generation of fifteen- to twenty-five-year-olds who were willing to die for their freedom. Anyone who believes that young people cannot make a difference in the struggle against global warming and the loss of biodiversity needs to study Indonesian history *now*. The world's third-largest country would never have become independent without the work of people in their teens and early twenties – although I hope today's young climate activists will use less violent tactics.

But above all, what makes the Revolusi so fascinating is its enormous impact on the rest of humanity. It shaped expectations about the nature of decolonisation: not a gradual, decades-long process of increasing autonomy, but a swift transition to independence. Not limited to one small portion of the colony, but affecting the entire territory. And not restricted to a few specific powers or ministries, but constituting a complete transfer of political sovereignty. Fast, comprehensive, and complete: that was the model forged in Indonesia and actively pursued in many other parts of the world in the decades that followed.

In addition to shaping the decolonisation process, the Revolusi also encouraged all the newly formed nations to work together. In photographs of the bombing in Jakarta, you can see an extremely long billboard suspended above a footbridge over Jalan Thamrin. 'Asian African Conference Commemoration', it says, and below that are the words, 'Advancing South–South Cooperation'. The contrast with the smoke and panic below is striking. The billboard referred to a recent international commemorative conference; sixty years before 2015, Indonesia had extended its hand to other recently independent countries.

A few years after the final handover of power by the Netherlands, the fashionable Javanese resort town of Bandung hosted the legendary Asian–African Conference, the first summit of world leaders without the West. They represented a staggering billion and a half people, more than half the world population at the time. 'Bandung', as the conference became known, was described by the Black American author and participant Richard Wright as 'a decisive moment in the consciousness of sixty-five per cent of the human race'. What happened there would 'condition the totality of human life on this

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earth', he argued.[1] That claim may sound inflated, but it was not far from the truth. In the years that followed, every region of the globe was touched by the Revolusi – large parts of not only Asia, the Arab world, Africa and Latin America, but also the United States and Europe. The American civil rights movement and the unification of Europe were, for better or for worse, largely prompted by 'Bandung'. It was a milestone in the emergence of the modern world. A French study from 1965 did not mince words; evoking the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, a key event of the French Revolution, it called Bandung no less than 'history's second *14 juillet*, a *14 juillet* on a planetary scale'.[2]

In the days that followed the bombing, Jeanne and I returned to driving from one retirement home to the next. The week before, we had written down some amazing stories, and it felt wonderful to return to finding and interviewing eyewitnesses. Although neither of us is Dutch or Indonesian, their life stories utterly fascinated us. They told a universal tale of hope, fear and longing, which spoke volumes about our own lives and today's world.

The Revolusi was once world history – the world got involved in it and was changed by it – but unfortunately, its global dimensions have been almost forgotten. In the Netherlands, the former colonial power, I had to justify myself a thousand times: Why write about Indonesia? And why me, 'a Belgian, of all people'? 'Because it doesn't belong to you any more!' I would say, laughing. Sometimes I added that Belgium had also suffered under Dutch oppression, that I was writing from my own experience, etc. But what I really believe is that the world's fourth-largest country should fascinate everyone. If we attach importance to the founding fathers of the United States, to Mao or to Gandhi, why shouldn't we also look to the pioneers of Indonesia's struggle for freedom? But not everyone saw it that way. After I had said a few things about my research in a weekly magazine, the far-right Dutch populist party PVV placed an indignant comment on Facebook: 'I think this moron should try writing a book about King Leopold and the Belgian Congo before he gets up on his high horse.'[3] But I had no intention of doing that again.

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Processes of decolonisation are often reduced to national struggles between the colonial power and the colony: France vs. Algeria, Belgium vs. Congo, Germany vs. Namibia, Portugal vs. Angola, Britain vs. India and the Netherlands vs. Indonesia – like a series of vertical lines, side by side but never intersecting, a kind of barcode. But alongside that vertical component, there are also many horizontal processes. The participants include neighbouring countries, allies, local militias, regional actors and international organisations. Their influence must not be filtered out. If we do that, we are stuck in the nineteenth century, with the Western nation-state and its colonial borders as our frame of reference. If we look at the past only through the arrow slits, we won't see the whole landscape. The time is ripe to stop focusing on national narratives and recognise the global dimension of decolonisation. Yes, that takes some effort. A tangle of influences is harder to analyse than a two-sided schema, but such schemas do violence to historical reality – certainly when we turn to Indonesian history.

It's worth saying again: the world got involved in Indonesia's revolution and was changed by it. Yet today, the Revolusi is commemorated as a chapter in national history only in Indonesia and the Netherlands. In Indonesia, it has stood for decades as the unwavering foundational myth of the outstretched, ultra-diverse state. Whatever island I landed on, the local airport often turned out to have been named after a freedom fighter. Street names and statues form lasting tributes to the Revolusi. And in the cities, museums with dioramas, like the stained-glass windows of medieval cathedrals, offer graphic, canonical versions of a primal legend – in this case, the story of the nation. That story is essential for maintaining the archipelago's unity in the face of separatist tendencies, such as those of the strict Muslims of Aceh in the country's far northwest, or of the Papuans of New Guinea in the far southeast. Despite the contrasting ideologies of Indonesia's heads of state since independence, they have all drawn on the same historical narrative: the heroic *perang kemerdekaan*, the war of independence from colonial rule. The same pattern can be found in history textbooks for secondary schools. A new history text from 2014, *Sejarah Indonesia dari Proklamasi sampai Orde Reformasi*

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(Indonesian History from the Proclamation of Independence to the Post-Suharto Era), devotes no less than the first half of its 230 pages to the brief Revolusi period, 1945–9, hurtling through the long span from 1950 to 2008 in its second half.[4] In recent years, a generation of young Indonesian historians have spoken out against an approach that is too Indonesia-centric and boldly turned against what they describe as the *tirani Sejarah Nasional*, the tyranny of national history. But the broader Indonesian public still sees the Revolusi as a chiefly national affair.[5]

Meanwhile Dutch perspectives on decolonisation are shifting. You can see that in the titles of influential publications. While an earlier generation of books emphasised what the Netherlands had lost – with titles that translate to *The Final Century of the Indies*, *Farewell to the Indies*, *Farewell to the Colonies* and *The Retreat* – more recent studies have instead focused on Dutch violence: *The Burden of War*, *Soldier in Indonesia*, *Robber State*, *Colonial Wars in Indonesia* and *The Burning Kampongs of General Spoor*.[6] In a parallel tendency, a new generation of journalists and activists are calling attention to the less flattering sides of Dutch history, which have often been covered up. Yet even after many years of richly nuanced and often superb historical writing, the impact on public awareness seems minimal. First-class diplomatic histories, meticulous political biographies, a few brilliant doctoral theses and some excellent books for the general public have done little to improve the very poor Dutch grasp of their own colonial and post-colonial history. In December 2019, when the British polling company YouGov investigated which European country was proudest of its colonial past, the Netherlands stood head and shoulders above the rest. A full fifty per cent of the Dutch respondents said they were proud of their former empire, in contrast to thirty-two per cent of the British, twenty-six per cent of the French and twenty-three per cent of the Belgians. What was still more striking was the exceptionally low number of Dutch respondents who were ashamed of colonialism: six per cent, in contrast to fourteen per cent of the French, nineteen per cent of the British and twenty-three per cent of the Belgians. More than a quarter of the Dutch people polled (twenty-six per cent) wished their country still had an overseas empire.[7]

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What explains this peculiar attitude? Was Dutch colonialism really so much better than that of other European powers, giving the Dutch more objective reason for pride? Or has new information been so much slower to trickle in? Evidently the latter, because the historical literature does not make a strong case for national self-satisfaction. The insights of decades of thorough historical research inspire not pride but horror, yet this fact is still not widely understood in the Netherlands.

Maybe the striking ignorance about colonialism in the Netherlands is not surprising. In a country where it was possible as recently as 2006 for Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, whose university degree was in history, in an address to the lower house of parliament during the annual debate on the government budget, the most important gathering of the political year, to call on the people's representatives to show more pride and vigour with a triumphant reference to 'the VOC mentality', can you really blame the public for having a generally positive image of this historical overseas venture? Spoiler alert: the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie), the Dutch East India Company, was responsible for at least one genocide. That was a well-established fact by 2006; in fact, it's been known since 1621. When a few members of parliament responded to Balkenende's rhetoric with indignant boos, the prime minister quickly hedged his statements, expressing a shred of doubt: 'Surely?'

This book is about that doubt. About pride and shame. About liberation and humiliation. About hope and violence. It aims to bring together the findings of numerous historians with a deep command of the subject, whose findings have not always become general knowledge. It builds on what other authors, journalists and artists in various countries have brought to light. But most of all, it draws on the memories of the people who experienced all this first-hand: the last remaining eyewitnesses to the Revolusi. I am a great believer in oral history. Despite many hours of being driven around on mopeds, the sometimes scorching heat and palpable air pollution in the cities, the hundreds of mosquito bites after a night on a ferry's afterdeck, and the stress of a terrorist attack around the corner, it was

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always worth it. Everyday people have so much to say. It was a privilege, in every respect, to hear their stories.

Between July 2015 and July 2019, I did about a year of fieldwork in total, including eight months in Asia. I visited countless islands and spoke to many hundreds of people. This led to formal interviews with 185 of them, at least half an hour long but typically lasting an hour and a half. Often our conversations went on much longer, or I returned later. I explained to all potential interviewees that I was working on a book about the history of Indonesian independence, and I asked their permission to interview them and share their testimonies. What I mean by a formal interview is that I asked for their name and age each time, went through their life story with them chronologically, took notes visibly and constantly, asked follow-up questions about particular topics and sometimes made recordings or photographs, always with permission. When people were unwilling to share certain memories, I abandoned that line of questioning. I prefer to work on a foundation of trust and respect. A few eyewitnesses asked for the opportunity to review any quotations that I used, and a handful preferred to remain anonymous. I always respected these wishes, of course. Although the general tone of these conversations was calm and quiet, they were usually far from emotionless. I saw anger, sorrow and vengefulness, but also wistfulness, remorse and regret, alongside humour, frustration and resignation. They laughed, they grieved and they fell silent. Most of my interviewees were very advanced in years, but the detail and specificity of their memories sometimes astounded me. If there's one thing I've learned from listening to elderly people, it's that the present fades faster than your youth, especially if your youth was eventful. Even after everything else is gone, sometimes the wasteland of memory still echoes with a children's song. Or a trauma. Some boulders refuse to budge.

The interviews took place in almost twenty different languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Sundanese, Batak, Balinese, Manado, Togian, Toraja, Buginese, Mandarese, Ambonese, Morotai, Japanese, Nepali, English, French and Dutch. Add a slew of dialects to this Tower of Babel and you can see the extent of the challenge. Although I could eventually manage a simple conversation in Indonesian, I always had

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interpreters to assist me during the interviews, if only because many older people don't even speak that newfangled national language. The interpreters translated into English, French, German and Dutch. Now and then, the translation had to take place in two steps, through Indonesian. Because translators and interpreters are the quiet heroes of globalisation, I give all their names in the back matter. Without them, I could never have succeeded.

I tracked down the eyewitnesses by asking everyone I met – an imam, the director of a retirement home, a young soldier – whether maybe they knew where I could find people. I told everyone around me that I was working on this project; that led to useful contacts. Social media provided me with a megaphone, and Couchsurfing

Map 2: Spread of *Homo erectus* (± one million years ago)




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introduced me to amazing people. In Indonesia and Japan, I even found a few eyewitnesses on Tinder: man or woman, young or old, near or far, I always swiped right and accepted everyone. This enabled me to meet hundreds of strangers I would never have spoken to on the street. Sometimes I had to point out my profile, which explained who I was and that I was mainly interested in their grandmas and grandpas. It worked.

But the oldest Indonesian I met didn't come to my attention through a dating app. It was during a lunch break in Leiden, back when I was doing doctoral research. I cycled from the archaeology faculty to the natural history museum, where I admired his powerful jaw, robust constitution and handsome features. The palaeontology curator took the remains from a safe and laid them in front of me on a felt cloth. There they were, a molar, a femur and the top of the skull of Java Man, the first *Homo erectus* ever excavated. The Dutch physician and naturalist Eugène Dubois discovered him in Java in 1891. This was the find that confirmed Darwin's theory, the first true link between humans and other animals.[8] These days, he is thought to be one million years old. *Homo erectus* migrated from Africa to Java, which was not yet an island, but attached to Sumatra, Borneo, Bali and the Asian mainland. That's why elephants, tigers, orangutans and other mainland species can still be found there. The islands further east have a different, more 'Australian' fauna: echidnas, wallabies, quolls and other marsupials. A biological dividing line runs across the archipelago: the Wallace Line, named after Alfred Russel Wallace, the brilliant but often overshadowed co-creator of the theory of evolution. One million years – that's a long time ago. *Homo erectus* did not arrive in Europe until half a million years later, and it was not until about 12,000 years ago that both the Americas had human inhabitants. Unlike these far corners of the globe, Indonesia was part of the first wave of expansion by the world's first human inhabitants. Perhaps human evolution was also a kind of Asian–African Conference.

That is certainly true of the spread of *Homo sapiens*. If each millennium is a single swipe on Tinder, we have to swipe 925 times to see the successor to *Homo erectus* arrive in Indonesia from Africa. Around

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Map 3: Spread of *Homo sapiens* (until ± 50,000 years ago)




75,000 years ago, the first small groups of modern humans went from the mainland to the archipelago; in those days, Europe was still home to Neanderthals.[9] The new arrivals in Indonesia were probably akin to Melanesians, with dark skin, curly hair and round eyes, the distant ancestors of the Papuans of New Guinea and the Aboriginal Australians. They crossed the Wallace Line – we don't know what sorts of vessels they used – and went as far as Tasmania. They were hunter-gatherers, of course, a lifestyle that prevailed for more than ninety-nine per cent of human history. But around 7000 BCE (another sixty-eight swipes later) they began to cultivate root vegetables such as taro and yams in inland New Guinea, along with sago palms and

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banana trees.[10] Around the same time, there were also experiments with food production in China. Instead of simply picking wild rice, some people started to grow it themselves. That went so well that it eventually led to population growth and migration, even overseas.[11] This development, known as the Austronesian expansion, brought people with typical Asiatic features – lighter skin, straight hair and almond eyes – to Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, Sulawesi and Java, where they arrived five swipes later, around 2000 BCE. Their vessels were double-outrigger canoes, stabilised by floats on both sides, like the *jukung* still commonly found in the archipelago. Wherever they went, they planted rice. They kept chickens and pigs and also grew millet, taro, sago, yam, coconut and bananas. They made earthenware and learned metalworking. Their lifestyle was sedentary; their wooden houses were elevated on poles and had attractive curved roofs. To commemorate their ancestors, they built monuments and menhirs, as the Toraja people of South Sulawesi still do.

In the millennia that followed (from 2000 BCE to 1200 CE) their way of life spread across a huge area, from Madagascar to Easter Island and Hawaii. The languages that emerged there were all part of the Austronesian family, which was the world's most geographically widespread group of languages prior to colonisation. Without a doubt, these peoples were 'the greatest sailors in history up to the fifteenth century'.[12] In Southeast Asian waters, they also benefited from a literal push. From November to March, the northeast trade winds are ideal for the voyage to China and India, and the southwest trade winds, which blow from May to September, speed the journey back. The average wind speed of 4 to 5 on the Beaufort scale made for comfortable sailing trips, usually undisturbed by high waves or heavy storms.[13] Only off the archipelago's south coast were the waves high – they rolled in from Antarctica. This is why, until the era of the steamship, contact between Java and Australia was rare.

Rice growing led to much more complex societies. Wet fields, or paddies, yielded more rice than dry fields, but required a much larger-scale approach. The earliest rice farms were tiny, but later entire plains were transformed into glittering paddies. Even slopes were turned into astonishing terraced fields. Anyone who has ever

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Map 4: Austronesian expansion (± 3000 BCE – ± 1200 CE)




admired the ingenious irrigation systems that supply such fields understands that this is not the work of a single farmer, family or even generation. It takes far more consultation and co-ordination to maintain all those little dikes, canals and sluice gates. Chieftains became leaders, harvests increased and villages grew into cities. An agricultural society that produces surpluses can begin trading – in rice, vegetables, baskets, earthenware and also luxury goods. In the final centuries BCE, people were already trading bronze daggers, axes and drums, from Vietnam to southern China and Indonesia.[14] Local communities had become part of regional empires.

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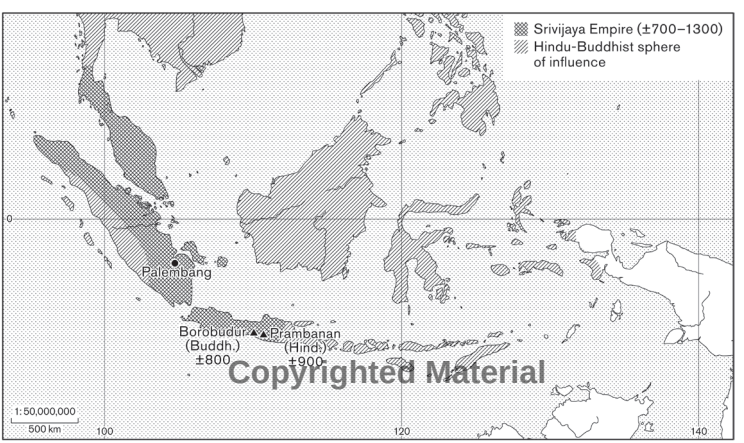
The archipelago was a crossroads of civilisations. Through its ports

passed not only goods, but also gods. Itinerant priests from India brought Brahmanism, the precursor to Hinduism. As early as the fifth century CE, a ruler in Borneo offered Brahmans a gift of 'water, ghee, tawny cows and sesame seeds, as well as eleven bulls'.[15] Those words, etched into a stone pillar, are Indonesia's oldest surviving text. Two centuries later, a Buddhist from China wrote with enthusiasm about the archipelago: 'In the fortified city of Fo-Qi [now Palembang] Buddhist priests number more than one thousand, whose minds are bent on learning and good practices. They investigate and study all the subjects that exist just as in [India]; the rules and ceremonies are not at all different. If a Chinese priest wishes to go the West in order to listen [to] and read [Buddhist scriptures], he had better stay here one or two years and practice the proper rules and then proceed to central India.'[16]

The city now called Palembang in South Sumatra was the capital of a powerful Buddhist kingdom, Srivijaya. For six centuries, it controlled trade and maritime routes between China and India. Malay became the lingua franca of the seas. Religions from India also took root in Java, even reaching far inland. Forty kilometres to the northwest of present-day Yogyakarta, Borobudur, the world's largest Buddhist structure, was built around 800. Its astonishing terraced

Map 5: The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism



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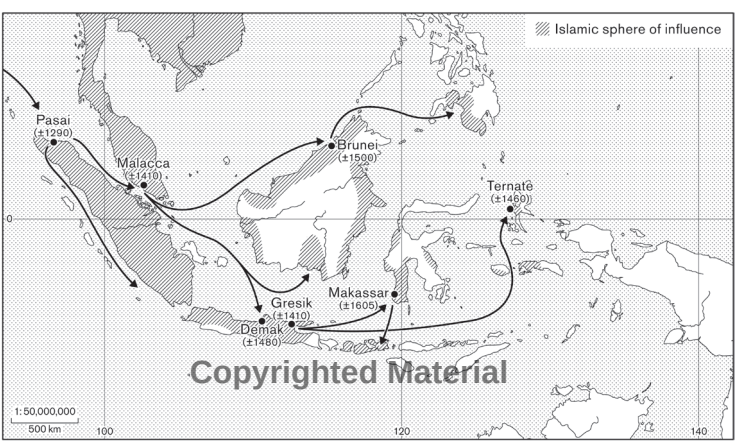
architecture was decorated with thousands of bas-reliefs and dozens of Buddha sculptures. Fifty kilometres away, the Hindu temple compound known as Prambanan was erected starting in 900. At least as impressive as Borobudur, it boasts the finest sculpture of a cow I have ever seen. Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted in peace.[17] In Java and Bali a unique blend formed, in which the historical Buddha was worshipped as the peer of the Hindu divinities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

This cultural fusion reached its pinnacle in the fourteenth-century Majapahit empire, centred in Java, which spanned the archipelago from Malaysia to New Guinea. It was not as unified as the Roman empire; the ruler in the capital worked together with local vassals. But in the twentieth-century struggle for independence, Majapahit was the ultimate historical prototype, the proof that there had once been a great and glorious homegrown empire. Majapahit was the source of the red and white used in the revolutionary flag and retained as today's national colours. Architecture, wood carving, batik, dance and the Javanese language reached an unprecedented level of refinement. In the Majapahit courts, ancient Indian epic poems such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* took on their characteristic Javanese form: a wondrous wayang play with

Map 6: Height of the Majapahit empire (1293–1401)



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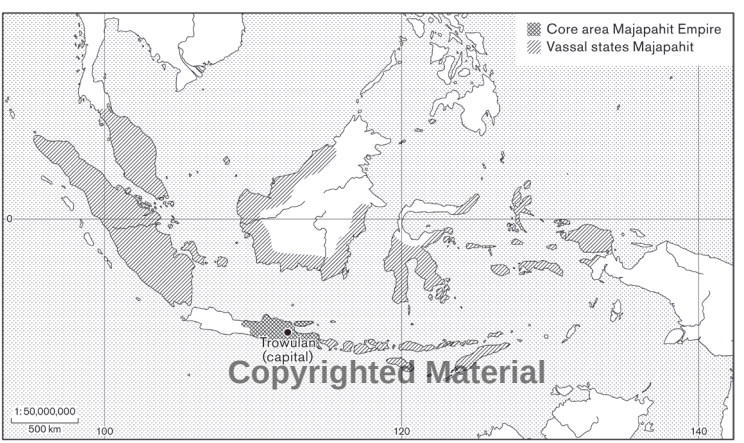
shadow puppets. The performances went on all night. The puppeteer sat cross-legged, telling and acting out the old stories, while an oil lamp projected the very evocative silhouettes of the buffalo-hide puppets onto a screen. They were magical performances: heroic, suspenseful, violent and occasionally funny. The play was accompanied by the soft, mesmerising sounds of a gamelan orchestra, the same elusive polyrhythmic music that would centuries later influence Western composers such as Claude Debussy, Erik Satie and John Cage.

The Chinese element also grew. From 1405 onwards, seven enormous expeditions were led by the eunuch admiral Zheng He. By way of the Indonesian archipelago, he travelled to Ceylon, India, Arabia and even the east coast of Africa. Some members of his expeditions stayed behind, forming the first seeds of the Chinese diaspora. Zheng He's fleet consisted at times of more than 300 vessels and 27,000 sailors. Some of his ships were 120 metres long. Consider the context: this was almost a century before Columbus set off with three caravels about twenty-five metres long and ninety men. Portugal, Europe's largest seafaring nation, had not yet dared to venture beyond Morocco.[18] Indonesia didn't need Europe to be connected to the world.

Map 7: The spread of Islam (until ± 1650)



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All those trade relations also permitted the spread of a new religion born somewhere far to the west. It especially appealed to merchants. Javanese feudalism was very hierarchical, but the new faith required everyone, from nobleman to nobody, to practise humility, kneel five times a day and donate to the poor. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam spread by way of Indonesia's port cities. This was not the result of large-scale immigration, conquest or force; it was the religion's egalitarian nature that made it so appealing. The earliest mosques were built in a Hindu-Buddhist style. Islam gradually spread throughout the archipelago, with the exception of Bali and Papua (which remained Hindu-Buddhist and animist respectively). Kings declared themselves sultans and kingdoms became sultanates, but the wayang plays were still performed and traditional beliefs in ancestors and spirits persisted – right up to the present. On a beach in southern Java, I was once advised not to wear a green swimsuit because Ratu Kidul, the goddess of the oceans, might swallow me up. After fourteen centuries of Hinduism and Buddhism and five centuries of Islam, such beliefs are still flourishing.[19]

'Java . . . what a mishmash that place is!' said 102-year-old Djajeng Pratomo, with a twinkle in his eye. Yes, that was one way of putting it. We sat in his room in a retirement home in Callantsoog, close to the tip of North Holland. It was four o'clock, an overcast summer afternoon. The dunes were dark with rain, the beach deserted and the sea pimpled. The room was swelteringly hot; Pratomo liked to keep warm. A nurse had just served us the most traditional of Dutch treats: the tiny pancakes called *poffertjes*, with powdered sugar. They brought a grin to the face of the short, thin man, whose chair was much too large for him. 'It's a very complicated affair, Indonesia,' he said, wiping a little powdered sugar from his trousers. 'Such a confusing mess!' To hear Pratomo's stories was to travel back in time. Apart from a couple of schoolboys, no one had interviewed him in the past thirty years.[20] I had first heard him mentioned in Jakarta; he was said to live 'somewhere in the Netherlands', but the spelling of his name was unclear. After a lot of online fuss, I found first his name, then a school assignment, then two boys, who put me in touch with their teacher.

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That teacher referred me on to his daughter, who extended a friendly invitation to Callantsoog. And now here I was. Pratomo had just become the village's oldest resident and had his name in the local paper. He was amused by the thought that he, a Javanese man, was now the elder of a village in North Holland. 'Go on, have another poffertje.'[21]

As I chewed the lukewarm dough ball, it occurred to me that the Dutch colonial enterprise began not with a hunger for land, but with a hankering for flavour. The Netherlands did not invade an existing country to take it over. At first, it didn't invade any place at all and had no intention of taking over anything. All it wanted to do was take things *away*, in trade, particularly spices. For centuries, Asian spices had been treasured in Europe. In the only surviving cookbook from Roman times, *De re coquinaria* by Apicius, more than three-quarters of the recipes require large amounts of pepper.[22] In the mood for *pullus tractogalatus*, chicken with milk and honey? Then you needed an ingredient in your house from thousands of kilometres away. *Dulcia* with eggs and pine nuts? Without pepper from distant Asia, it lacked fire and flavour. Roman ships didn't balk at a few extra nautical miles. From the east coast of Egypt, they sailed to East Africa for ivory, to Arabia for incense and, furthest of all, to India for pepper.[23] 'India' stood for just about everything east of the Arabian Peninsula. That early trade also extended over land all the way to China. Precious goods travelled the Silk Road: lacquer, gold, silver, sugar, saffron, cinnamon.[24] In Syria, archaeologists have found skeletons from the Roman age wrapped in silk from Chinese imperial workshops.[25] Digs in India have unearthed Roman amphorae, oil lamps and statuettes. And Roman coins have been found as far away as Thailand.[26]

And the love of spices lingered. Medieval European cooking was much sweeter and more heavily seasoned than its modern counterpart. The habit of saving sweet flavours for dessert first formed in late-seventeenth-century French gastronomy.[27] Medieval cooks threw raisins, figs and cardamom into their sauces, combinations that to us are more redolent of Indian or Arabic cuisine. Compared to the herbs that could be picked in European fields, woods and monastery

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gardens – like chives, sage, sorrel, parsley and rosemary – the Asian spices were in a different league. Pepper, nutmeg, cardamom, cloves and cinnamon were hard and woody and had an extremely long shelf life. No one in Europe knew exactly what plants they came from. Only when crushed did they release their incredible aromas, which were so divine that various medieval authors situated paradise on earth somewhere in that mythical 'India'. And they were not only exceptionally tasty, but also extraordinarily healthy and medicinal. If your four humours (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) were out of balance, spices were the solution. Nutmeg was classified as hot and dry, ginger as hot and wet, and pepper as very hot and dry, while cloves helped to relieve toothache. Thanks to their magical perfumes, they fetched high prices. If a craftsman in London circa 1450 earned around eight pence a day, then a pound of pepper or ginger cost about two days' wages. A pound of cinnamon? Three days of work. A pound of cloves? Four and a half days. A pound of saffron? One month.[28]

For centuries, luxury items remained horrendously expensive, not only because they were produced far away (cloves and nutmeg came from the Moluccas, for instance), required a great deal of manual labour (as did saffron, picked from crocus flowers) or were extremely rare (like ambergris, which came from sperm whale innards), but also because so many intermediaries were involved. When the maid in an elite urban household in Bruges around 1500 grated a little nutmeg onto the cauliflower, it marked the last step in a journey around the world and through the hands of scores of merchants. A picker had harvested and dried the nut in Banda, the tiny group of islands in eastern Indonesia where the nutmeg was the only type of tree. His village chief then sold it to a Javanese or Malay trader, who resold it in a port in eastern Sumatra or the Malay Peninsula to Indian sailors who took it to Ceylon. There the nut was probably purchased by Gujaratis, Persians or Arabs, who sent it on to the south coast of the Arab Peninsula. If the cargo was shipped by way of the Persian Gulf, it ended up in the markets of Baghdad and the ports of Syria, which were linked to the Mediterranean trade network. But if it went by way of the Red Sea, then after stops in Cairo and Alexandria it came into the possession of Genoese or Venetian sailors, who took it to the

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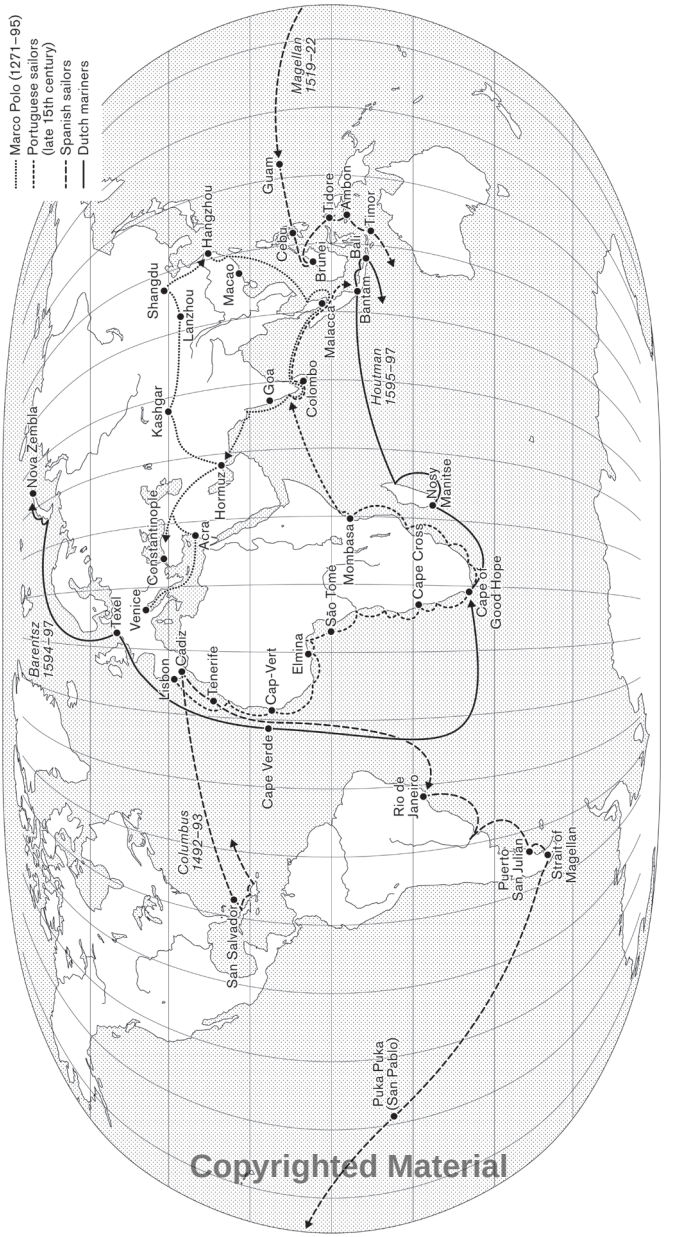
Map 8: Voyages of discovery and the spice trade

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Italian Peninsula. They were the first Christians to handle the nut after all the animists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jains and Zoroastrians along the route. And then the little gem had to find its way over land, along the coast and up inland waterways to Bruges. And of course, every time it changed hands, the price increased, and each port had its own duties and transshipment costs. The consequences are easy to guess. Around 1500, once a handful of cloves had reached Venice, it might easily cost a hundred times as much as it had in the Moluccas (or 'Spice Islands').[29] Wasn't there a cheaper way?

Yes, there was, the Portuguese decided. Two hundred years earlier, Marco Polo had become the first European to land in Sumatra and to discover which islands produced what spices. Suppose we turn our backs on the Mediterranean and sail around Africa instead? How big could that 'country' be? Over decades, European seafarers learned just how big. From 1430 onwards, Portuguese expeditions began to sail south, planning to turn east as soon as they could, but the African continent proved far longer than they had imagined. Not until 1498, seventy years after their adventure had begun, did a Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, first round the Cape. He sailed on to the west coast of India, where he learned that you had to go even further for the best spices: to Ceylon for cinnamon, to Sumatra and Java for pepper and much further still, to the Moluccas, for cloves, nutmeg and mace (the fragrant covering of the nutmeg seed). By 1525, the Portuguese had built up a modest commercial network throughout the region, with bases in Hormuz at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Goa in western India, Colombo in Ceylon, Malacca on the Malay Peninsula, Ambon in the Moluccas and later Macao on the south coast of China. In Ambon they erected a fort, the first Western settlement in what would later be known as Indonesia. They enriched the Malay language with words like *bendera* (from *bandeira*, flag), *gereja* (from *igreja*, church), *sekolah* (from *escola*, school) and *minggu* (week, from *domingo*, Sunday). The island of Ambon had a beautiful bay and was halfway from the volcanic islands of Ternate and Tidore, where they stocked up on cloves, to the tiny Banda Islands where nutmeg grew. From then on, Europe would have direct access to the source. Or at least, Portugal would, and it could sell its bounty – ten tons of

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nutmeg and thirty tons of cloves each year – in Europe at a large profit.[30]

Wasn't there a cheaper way? The same question occurred to the Spanish. But instead of struggling south, beating a course against the wind, they headed west. How big could the Atlantic Ocean be? If the world was round, then surely the Spice Islands were waiting for them on the other side? When Columbus arrived in Cuba in 1492, he thought he was in Japan. No, wait, he decided when he reached Haiti, *this* must be Japan.[31] So everything else in the area could only be India. All right, there were fewer spices than he'd expected, but wasn't that because it was winter? Be that as it may, he decided to call the locals Indians. A generation later, Magellan discovered that you could in fact sail westward to India, but you first had to make a large detour to the south, almost reaching Antarctica, and then pass below the South American mainland and sail on to the Pacific. The world was much larger than Europeans had thought. Magellan's voyage came to an end on a group of islands that he named after the Spanish king: the Philippines. He was killed by the locals, but afterwards his crew reached the destination they'd dreamed of, the Moluccas.

If the southerly and westerly routes are so difficult, the Dutch thought, then let's try going north. How big could Russia be? Willem Barentsz made three attempts from 1594 onward, but on his last voyage he became stranded in the pack ice of a sea that ever since then has been named after him. After his crew returned with tales of a fierce winter on the polar island of Nova Zembla (Novaya Zemlya), the northern route no longer seemed so attractive. Archaeologist friends who, in the 1990s, excavated the hut where Barentsz and his men spent the winter, said that to warn off polar bears they had to keep watch with flares every night. After dreaming of tropical spices, Barentsz must have been surprised to find himself repelling polar bears.

So the Portuguese route around Africa was the best one after all. Cornelis de Houtman from Gouda was the first Dutchman to accomplish the feat. With maps and information partly stolen from the port of Lisbon, he reached the west coast of Java in 1596, finding not only the Portuguese and the Chinese there but also pepper.[32] The Dutch were

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neither the first traders nor the wealthiest. De Houtman travelled on to Bali, picking up spices here and there, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake (just like the Portuguese) and returning to Amsterdam two years later. He earned just enough from this historic voyage to cover the costs, but the route to 'the Orient' was open for business.

The years that followed are referred to in Dutch as the era of the *wilde vaart*, 'wild seafaring', with scores of expeditions launched from Holland and Zeeland. They didn't set out in the name of their king and nation, as the Portuguese did, for the simple reason that they had no monarch and didn't exactly have a nation either. In 1588, the Netherlands had become the first country in northwestern Europe without a king, and the Republic was not a traditional state under centralised authority but an alliance of seven fairly autonomous provinces or states, which is why the name of the country still looks plural in so many European languages (the Netherlands, les Pays-Bas, die Niederlande, los Países Bajos, i Paesi Bassi and so forth). This confederate structure encouraged vigorous internal trade, to be sure, but it also led to intense competition. In 1602, the States General, the consultative body with representatives of all the Dutch provinces, decided it made more sense to join forces. All shipping companies in the Republic were merged into one, the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie; VOC), which was granted a monopoly on trade with the East. This renowned corporation existed for two centuries and is unique for two reasons. For one thing, it was a private enterprise with far-reaching public powers. The VOC was authorised to conclude international treaties, administer justice, build forts and recruit soldiers. In other words, it had substantial diplomatic, legal and military responsibilities. Secondly, it was the first company in the world to issue shares of stock that could be traded; its co-owners could choose to sell at any time. They therefore did not have the same bonds of loyalty as the owners of a traditional family company. Shareholders wanted profit, and they wanted it fast. The combination of these two unique characteristics was every bit as explosive as you might guess. The VOC was hell-bent on turning a profit for its private investors and was equipped with the entire arsenal of public authority. There was no way this could go well.

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The composition of the VOC crews didn't help. The sailors were anything but the flower of their nation. Although only four per cent of the nearly 5,000 voyages undertaken between 1595 and 1795 ended in shipwreck, the crews were buffeted by scurvy, dysentery, yellow fever, blackwater fever and brawls. A voyage took a year and a half, and two out of three sailors never returned home. No wonder the VOC recruiters resorted to desperate measures. Before a ship set sail, they would go to Amsterdam's shadiest taverns to round up 300 or so drunkards, rowdies and other lowlifes. In run-down boarding houses, they would sign up paupers, indigents, orphans and vagrants. Not all were Dutch; there were also many Germans and Scandinavians.[33] Having washed up like driftwood in Amsterdam's seedy harbourside district of De Wallen, they had nothing left to lose. Imagine dragging that crew to the Far East. The VOC did it.

The rough-hewn European mariners who stopped in the archipelago did not strike the locals as superior beings. They were physically depleted, their gums bleeding from scurvy after living on hardtack and beer. The senior VOC officials in their elegant trunk hose and wide collars were in better health, having dined on fresh vegetables and good wine during the voyage – there was a kitchen garden for them on the afterdeck and even a pen with pigs and chickens – but when they arrived, they raised eyebrows. Javanese and Malay chronicles describe them as loud, panting, sweaty fellows who kissed women openly in the streets.[34] Puppets and sculptures portray them as crude giants with bulging eyes, big noses, red cheeks, weird hair, large clumsy feet and – to the horror of the refined Javanese – visible teeth.[35] One captain was described as 'a raging demon with brusque gestures and a raspy voice', from whose 'open mouth saliva was dripping' and who gave off 'an unbearable odour of sweat'.[36]

Again, the VOC captains weren't there to conquer territory, at least not at first. They would ideally have liked to lay anchor in the bay or inlet of some tropical island and quietly bob there as sacks of spices were heaved on board, toasting the sale with brandy in their quarters – if their local trading partner drank alcohol, that is. But it was rarely so simple. The Portuguese got in the way, the Spaniards crossed their path and the locals proved to be canny negotiators. You

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could never be certain of your shipment of cloves, nor of the price. So they saw no alternative to establishing a presence on land. To ensure reliable access to the goods they craved, they had to leave men behind. In 1605 the VOC, with the aid of the local population, took over the Portuguese fort in Ambon. It was not large, several hectares at most, but it was the first patch of Dutch soil in Southeast Asia.

Looking out over the magnificent bay, I understood at once why the Portuguese and the Dutch had fought over the place. Nature could hardly have made it more strategic: a perfect inland harbour. On the far side of the bay I saw Kota Ambon, the city that had risen around the fort. A few rusty freighters were anchored there; smaller vessels arrived and departed. The fort itself was closed to visitors; it was still in use by the military. Even now, after 400 years.

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# Chapter 2

## Assembling the Jigsaw Puzzle

*Dutch expansion in Southeast Asia, 1605–1914*

After my second poffertje I asked Pratomo about his year of birth. '1914, in Sumatra.' I was glad to hear it. Not only was he the oldest eyewitness to history that I could still talk to, but he'd been born in the year the colonial empire became complete. You often hear that the Dutch held sway over Indonesia for 350 years, from around 1600 to 1942, but that's a hoary myth kept alive by both nostalgic colonialists ('We had such a long history there . . .') and furious anti-colonialists ('That's how long the reign of terror lasted . . .'). Both have the same oversimplified view of the colonial period: the Dutch presence in the archipelago did begin around 1600, but for a long time the Netherlands neither controlled the area nor had any ambition to do so. The idea that the Dutch captured and colonised the archipelago from day one is simply wrong. Furthermore, in the year 1600 there was no unified area corresponding to present-day Indonesia, no cluster of islands acting as a political unit. The archipelago was a geographical entity, not a national one. Even some individual islands were home to a diverse range of kingdoms. The conquest of all those islands and their incorporation into the colony of the Dutch East Indies went very slowly.

It's helpful to think of the island empire as a jigsaw puzzle put together over more than three centuries. The fort built previously by the Portuguese in Ambon in 1605 was the first tiny piece of the puzzle to fall into Dutch hands, and the end of the Aceh War in 1914 completed the picture. The Indonesian historian Mochtar Lubis presents it very differently: 'In reality, however, the colony called the Netherlands East Indies lasted no more than thirty to thirty-five years.'[1] And it is true that the colony did not cover the entire territory

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of present-day Indonesia for longer than that. Ambon belonged to the Dutch for 337 years, Aceh for only twenty-eight. Yet that does not make 1914 the starting point of colonial history, which began much earlier and can be divided into five stages.

The first stage in assembling the jigsaw lasted from about 1600 to 1700. For the VOC's first century, its motto was, 'The less land, the better.' Stations in the East were an expensive proposition, to be contemplated only when absolutely essential for trade. After the conquest of Fort Ambon in 1605, the Netherlands established settlements on Ternate and Banda Neira, two other Moluccan Islands, in 1607. These were obvious choices for commercial reasons; Ternate and nearby Tidore were the islands from which the trade in cloves was controlled, and Banda, a mini-archipelago 800 kilometres further south, was the only place where nutmeg grew. Cloves are the dried flower buds of the clove tree; when fresh, they are bright green, soft and fleshy. Nutmeg is the seed of a green fruit. The name comes from *nuces moschatae*, 'nuts that smell of musk'.

As you approach by air, you can see how small they are. Ternate and Tidore are two round, volcanic islands, no more than a few kilometres in diameter, glittering like two emerald-green cufflinks on the sleeve of the Pacific. Their fertile slopes are thick with mango, coconut and clove trees. Birds-of-paradise swoop from branch to branch.

'The Dutch went on land in Ternate. They didn't go by way of Jakarta, which didn't exist yet. They didn't conquer Java first. It was here that their encounter with Indonesia began. They turned up here after the Portuguese.' Husain Syah spoke the most beautiful Indonesian I had ever heard, as befits the Sultan of Tidore, one of the country's last traditional rulers. Although the political role of this ancient elite is mainly symbolic, the Republic recognises their status, and they are held in great esteem by the people. We spoke in his palace's impressive reception room. A servant crossed the white marble floor to bring us tea and cake. Sultan Husain showed himself to be an exceptionally charming and intelligent man with a passion for history. 'We sometimes forget that our own lives spring from the past

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and that history is the mother that gave us life. We must cherish it.' He described how the Portuguese, Spanish, British and Dutch tried to gain a foothold. For a time, the fort built by the Dutch on Ternate in 1607 even served as the headquarters of the entire VOC.[2] 'They established themselves here, and it was from here that they set up their administrative centre in Batavia, known to us today as Jakarta.'[3]

The sultan was right. The forts made it easier for the company to buy and store trade goods, but they were very far away from the primary trade routes. In 1619 Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the head of Dutch operations in Asia, decided to move the VOC headquarters more than 3,000 kilometres west, from the Moluccas all the way to western Java. The placid little port town of 'Jayakarta' on the north coast suited his purposes. It was at an intersection of maritime routes, had a good harbour and offered more than enough drinking water and wood for building. That made it ideal for repairing ships, storing goods, giving the men time to rest and organising new departures.[4] Coen drove out the British, who had a trading post there, and burned the local settlement to the ground. Batavia was born. The plan was not to conquer Java from there – quite the contrary. Coen looked out over the sea and lived with his back to the island. He wanted as little as possible to do with the two neighbouring sultanates – Banten in western Java and Mataram in central and eastern Java. The Javanese were not even allowed to live in Batavia, for fear of uprisings.

How did this desolate, charred, smouldering heap of rubble ever become a thriving hub of world trade? The answer was simple: by enslaving people, thousands of them. If you associate slavery only with the trade between Africa and America, it's time to widen your horizons. Slave markets were an age-old institution in Asia, of which the VOC made eager use.[5] In the late sixteenth century, an enslaved person cost about nine guilders there.[6] Between 1600 and 1900, an estimated 600,000 enslaved people were traded by the Dutch in Asia; that's not much less than the Dutch share in the transatlantic slave trade.[7] One-quarter came from Bali and the others from elsewhere in the archipelago, or from the Philippines, India, Madagascar or even mainland Africa. They were bought, plundered, stolen or taken as spoils after wars and natural disasters; the archipelago was, and is,

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frequently hit by volcanic eruptions, cyclones and tsunamis. Others couldn't pay their debts. Unlike in the Americas, they included many women, and enslaved people ended up mainly in cities and less often on plantations.[8] In the moist, blistering heat of Batavia, they dug canals, built warehouses, tarred ships or erected forts. Enslaved women did domestic work or served as concubines. Some VOC officers boasted of having as many as 300 slaves.

Towards the end of the so-called Dutch Golden Age, there were 27,000 people living in Batavia, and half were enslaved.[9] How many of them knew that their city was named after the Batavians, the forefathers of the Dutch from Roman days, celebrated for their love of freedom?

Batavia was dubbed the queen of the East and, with its canals, windmills and drawbridges, resembled a tropical version of Amsterdam. The city was never intended to become the capital of the Dutch East Indies – there was no such thing as yet – but it did develop into the nerve centre of an 'Eastern' trade imperium extending from Cape Town to Nagasaki. By the mid-seventeenth century, the VOC, the 'Praiseworthy Company', possessed Europe's largest commercial fleet. It had dozens of forts and 'factories' (or trading stations) in southern Africa, in the Indian Ocean, on the Arabian Peninsula, along the Persian Gulf and the coasts of India and Ceylon, throughout Southeast Asia, along the south coast of China, and in Taiwan and Japan. But it did not control a contiguous territory. At the Cape settlement in southern Africa, founded by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, VOC ships could take on fresh vegetables and lemons to reduce the risk of scurvy. In Japan, the Netherlands was the only permitted foreign trading partner for two centuries. Between these two poles, the company traded in all directions: spices, tin, silver, sandalwood, camphor, cotton, silk, rice, shells, opium and enslaved people. In the archipelago, they used large numbers of Chinese traders. Batavia had the largest slave market in all of Southeast Asia.[10]

Long trade routes, small trading posts. But now and then, the VOC saw no option but to intervene in local affairs. That was because its success depended on the degree to which it could maintain a spice monopoly, by force if necessary. Growers in the Moluccas were not

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allowed to sell spices to anyone but the VOC, and a maximum price was set – not an attractive deal for them. From 1619 to 1629, Coen ruled from Batavia as governor-general. When it became clear in 1621 that Banda, in violation of its agreements, was still supplying nutmeg to other countries and companies, he sent a punitive expedition. The island's 10,000 to 15,000 inhabitants were massacred, and their land was assigned to VOC officials, who then imported thousands of enslaved workers to cultivate it. Today, we have a word for this: genocide. The genocide on Banda marked the transition from a purely mercantile project to a more territorial one. It was the first time that the VOC took over not a trading post but farmland.

Map 9: VOC factories and settlements in the seventeenth century




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Coen was ruthless. In 1623, the VOC didn't hesitate to torture and kill some ten uncooperative Englishmen in Ambon. Two years later, when Coen learned that the neighbouring island of Seram had begun to grow cloves and sell them to other buyers, he had all the clove trees chopped down, 35,000 in total. It takes twelve years before a young tree bears fruit. He had urged his employers in Amsterdam to keep in mind 'that trade cannot be maintained without war, nor war without trade'.[11] His approach drew fierce criticism even in his own time. His predecessor Laurens Reael deplored 'all the unjust, yea barbaric, measures' that the VOC imagined necessary. 'On a desolate sea, in desolate lands and with dead people, no profit whatsoever can be made.'[12] Even the VOC directors in Amsterdam, seventeen pipe-puffing, white-collared worthies who expressed themselves in baroque sentences, would have preferred the monopolies to be acquired with a little less bloodshed, but they continued to give Coen their full support because he was so good for the bottom line.

The VOC quietly shifted its focus from the maritime to the military. After 1650, the company ordered the felling of no fewer than three-quarters of *all* the clove trees *throughout* the Moluccas, so that no rival could benefit from them. Islands and villages that dared to plant new ones were mercilessly torched and razed to the ground. In Java, the company managed to take the north coast, which had several excellent harbours, and also fought for the ports of Malacca and Sumatra. The hunger for land sometimes took strange forms. In 1667, after years of arduous struggle, the English were finally willing to concede Run – a tiny nutmeg island near Banda, less than four square kilometres in size – in return for another Dutch possession: New Amsterdam, later to become Manhattan. The Dutch seized the opportunity. What did they care that the island on the western edge of the Atlantic was sixteen times larger? It was a swampy tract where no spices grew. They had no way of knowing that they were swapping the future location of the world's most expensive square kilometres for a few nutmeg trees on a minuscule, deserted tropical island in the Banda Sea.

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After 1700, a new stage began. In this period, the VOC was the most important European actor in the archipelago. It had sent the

competition packing, secured its monopoly, expanded its network of ports, forged ties with Chinese intermediaries and earned very satisfactory profits. But then something happened that no one had anticipated: spices went out of fashion. The latest trend from Paris was *nouvelle cuisine*, an approach to cooking that swore by pure, natural flavours for a subtler experience and better digestion. Another game dish smothered in cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon? No, thank you. 'These days, spices, sugar and saffron are forbidden in France,' the *Nouveau dictionnaire* reported in 1776.[13] Truffles, oysters, lobsters, sweetbreads and *foie gras* were in, and champagne, a recent invention, was coming into its own; these sophisticated foodstuffs were not the kind of thing you drowned in a heavily spiced marinade. All over Europe, the aristocracy followed the new fashion. For a century, the VOC had fought for lucrative trade monopolies, but now that it had them, spices were not exquisite but common.

Weren't there other products they could sell? Yes, the good news was that Europe was developing a taste not only for a new cuisine but also for new colonial luxury goods: coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco and cocoa. At first it was only aristocrats in refined rococo salons who sampled the new hot drinks with their little fingers extended, and who took snuff, the sophisticated alternative to vulgar smoking. But the urban middle class soon followed suit.[14] Coffee houses popped up in every city in Europe, and soon became known simply as cafés. Their menus featured not only novel drinks such as coffee, tea and hot chocolate but also new treats made from sugar and cocoa; modern pastry was born. Cocoa came from Central America, but the other new commodities grew in Southeast Asia. The VOC began planting coffee and tea in western Java in 1707; twenty years later, it was the world's largest coffee producer, outranking the Arabian Peninsula. By 1725, it controlled half to three-quarters of the global coffee trade. Chinese immigrants in Batavia began growing sugar in the Ommelanden, the rural area surrounding the city. They too made huge profits. The wellspring of economic growth was no longer the Moluccas but Java and Sumatra.

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But the new crops required land, a lot of land. What the VOC now wanted most was not harbours or orchards but vast agricultural

areas. The whole region surrounding Batavia was cultivated; private plantations grew rice, cotton and sugarcane. In the interior, the VOC captured ever larger swathes of the countryside from local rulers. By around 1750, it possessed half of Java. The company also took parts of Sumatra, Borneo and Sulawesi, as well as smaller islands such as Madura, Sumbawa and Sumba. It obtained supreme authority over some areas, but most remained under the rule of local monarchs who acceded to the wishes of the Dutch officials in return for gifts. This marriage of convenience between the colonial overlords and local potentates would endure for centuries.

Batavia's population reached 120,000; only 7,000 were European. Along the way, it hit a few bumps. Starting in 1733, thousands of the city's inhabitants died of inexplicable fevers. More than half the VOC officials died within a year of arriving, some 85,000 in total by the end of the century. A constant supply of new men from Europe was required, at crippling costs. The lavish profits of old turned into debts. Batavia gained a reputation as the world's unhealthiest city, although the cause was not discovered until the twentieth century: the creation of fish ponds on the marshy land to the north of the city had provided ideal living conditions for the malaria mosquito.[15]

When, on top of all this, the international sugar market collapsed under the pressure of competition from Brazil and the Caribbean, unrest grew among the many Chinese sugarcane workers in the Ommelanden. The Europeans in Batavia lived in growing fear of a Chinese uprising, fear partly incited by the VOC. In 1740, after a few skirmishes, the Dutch killed almost all the Chinese residents of Batavia, regardless of whether they were menial labourers who had slipped in from the countryside or completely innocent merchants and craftspeople from the city centre. The victims included blacksmiths, furniture makers and proprietors of eateries and tea houses. Estimates range from 4,000 to 12,000 dead; it was the largest massacre since the Banda genocide of 1621 and, unfortunately, not the last time that the Chinese bore the brunt of the violence. As a typical intermediary class between the European regime and the native population, the Chinese community was consistently caught between suspicion from above and jealousy from below.

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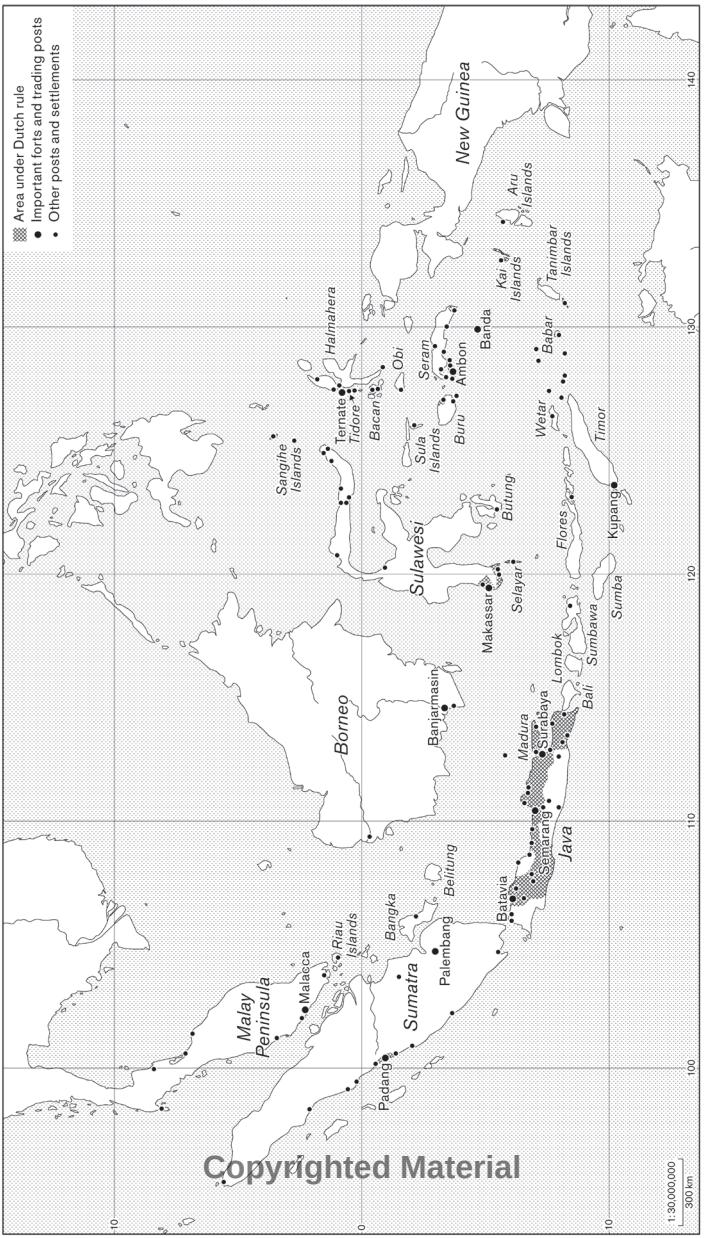
Map 10: VOC expansion in the eighteenth century

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The burgeoning territory required a larger, more expensive governing apparatus, especially with so many officials succumbing to malaria. The VOC had to post a growing staff to stations throughout the archipelago, no fewer than 35,000 people in 1750.[16] As the company's spending soared, so did its debt, and corruption rose at a frightening rate year after year. Who could keep tabs on all the functionaries deep in the interior and at remote outposts? Adding insult to injury, the French botanist Pierre Poivre had smuggled nutmeg shoots to Mauritius in 1770, breaking the long-established VOC monopoly. And worst of all, the British declared war on the Dutch again in 1780 and blockaded the seas around Batavia. Bankruptcy became inevitable; on 31 December 1799 the company, once so profitable, was dissolved. The Dutch state took over the entire enterprise, including all its debts, which amounted to 134 million guilders, a quarter of the national debt. By this time 'the Dutch state' meant the Batavian Republic. The old Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, led by the quasi-monarchy of the House of Orange, had just metamorphosed into a unitary state inspired by the French Revolution. It was the end of an era.

It had seemed like such a good idea, equipping the VOC trading company with the political and military means to command lucrative monopolies. But in practice it became impossible to maintain. When every ship had to have soldiers and cannons on board, when every depot had to be a fort, when every anchorage had to be fought for, when monopolies obtained with great difficulty turned out to be worthless, when more and more trade goods had to be grown by the company itself, and when half the employees were quickly laid low and the other half couldn't be trusted, the 'Praiseworthy' enterprise became an expensive business.

The eighteenth century, the VOC's second century, had begun with renewed promise – coffee seemed to be the new cloves – but the company never matched its earlier successes. This led to a power vacuum in the archipelago, which other actors rushed to fill: the British, the Arabs, pirates, Buginese traders from Sulawesi, but above all the Chinese, whose importance had grown steadily in the second half of

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the eighteenth century.[17] Before the Netherlands had completed even a quarter of the jigsaw, the whole thing fell apart again.

The third stage of putting together the jigsaw was brief (1800 to 1816) but crucial. For the first time, the old commercial empire was transformed into something that began to resemble a traditional colony, at least on paper. But it began with disintegration. In 1804, the Batavian Republic became a vassal state of revolutionary France and therefore the enemy of Britain, which seized many of its overseas factories: the Cape, Ceylon, Malacca, the coasts of India and many islands in the archipelago. In Southeast Asia, the Dutch were left with nothing but Java and a few minor way stations.

Nonetheless, not much changed until 1806, when Napoleon himself took an interest in the Dutch question, transforming the Batavian Republic into the Kingdom of Holland and elevating his brother Louis Napoleon to its throne. To set Java straight and prepare for the possibility of a British attack, the new king sent Herman Willem Daendels to Batavia. An unsurprising choice: Daendels was quite possibly the greatest Francophile in the Netherlands, a doctor of laws, an admirer of the Enlightenment and an ardent patriot. After failing to overthrow the House of Orange, he had fled to Paris and been caught up in the French Revolution. He rose through the ranks of the French revolutionary army and returned to the Netherlands as a general in 1795 to establish the Batavian Republic. Louis Napoleon could hardly have found a more loyal subject.

On 1 January 1808, Daendels arrived in Batavia and did exactly what was expected of him: he expanded the remnants of the VOC administration (some 9,000 men) into a fearsome military force of 20,000, which included new indigenous troops from Java, Bali, Sulawesi and Ambon. He ordered the construction of barracks, powder magazines, arsenals and military hospitals, fortified the port of Surabaya and moved the centre of Batavia a few kilometres inland, where the climate was healthier. But that wasn't all. Just as Napoleon had ordered the construction of roads and waterways in Europe, Daendels had an east–west road built in Java, parallel to the coast, so

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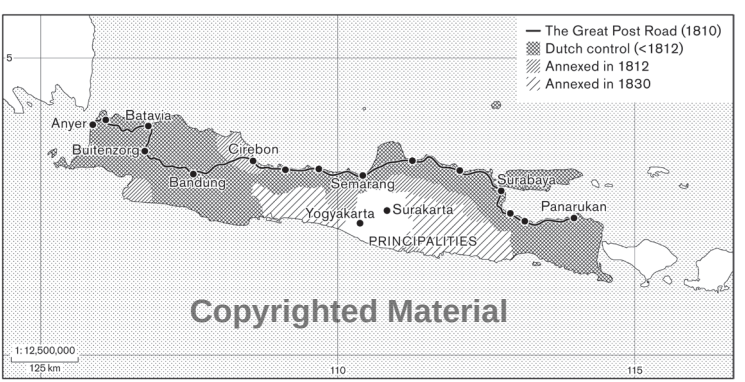
that messages and troops could be dispatched more easily. This impressive thoroughfare, the Grote Postweg or Great Post Road, more than 1,000 kilometres long, was completed within a year. Some 12,000 forced labourers died while building it.[18] The travel time from Batavia to Semarang, for instance, was reduced from ten days to three or four. To this day, that road remains Java's main traffic artery.

Napoleon had carved France into departments and prefectures; Daendels introduced nine prefectures in Java. Napoleon saw himself as the defender of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*; Daendels improved the lives of the enslaved. Napoleon valued education; Daendels advocated schools for Javanese children. Napoleon despised the feudalism of the *ancien régime*; Daendels brought low the island's sultans and other aristocrats. Napoleon advocated the rational management of the national economy; Daendels reformed agriculture, forestry and water management, even introducing a general inspectorate for the coffee plantations. He was known as the Napoleon of Batavia, with all of his namesake's revolutionary and dictatorial tendencies.

What Daendels brought to Java was nothing less than the idea of the modern state. A crucial part of that was his conviction that all land was state property.[19] He regarded the remaining Javanese principalities as anachronisms, oppressing the populace and blocking the way to modernity. In Cirebon and Banten he smashed the power of

Map 11: The Great Post Road and the annexation of the Javanese principalities (1800–1830)



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the nobility. He even went to Surakarta – also called Solo – and Yogyakarta, the two central Javanese cities with their roots in the mighty sultanate of Mataram, where the local rulers still received generous grants from the Dutch. He wrote to Napoleon about the sultan of Yogyakarta: 'I have taken away his crown and placed one of his sons in charge. [. . .] I seized the opportunity to annexe a few of his districts, and I abolished a kind of annual tribute of 10,000 piasters that the administration had been paying him. A similar sum had been paid to the Emperor of Solo [the Susuhunan of Surakarta], and I abolished that too. Finally, I established commercial and political ties with the new sultan that should be very advantageous to us.'[20]

In short, Daendels was a man of action. But all his work couldn't prevent a British naval blockade of Java in 1809. A year later, Napoleon annexed all of the Netherlands, making it French territory. From that moment on, Java was officially a French colony. 'Inhabitants of Java, your interests have become those of the French empire,' Napoleon proclaimed. 'My priority, now that I may welcome you as subjects, is to make certain that this flourishing colony shall be protected from destruction by envious Britain, which has threatened it for so long. The French, who are now your brothers, unite with you to defend your possessions. From now on, your friends and allies will be your fellow citizens. [. . .] Princes and peoples of Java, your religion, your property, your laws and your moral codes will be respected. [. . .] We seek friends, not enemies. [. . .] I ratify all the treaties you made with Holland. Arm yourselves against your enemies; be brave and loyal. I will be a generous patron to you.'[21]

After these valorous words, Daendels raised the French tricolour; even though it was essentially the Dutch flag turned ninety degrees, many of the Dutch were unhappy with the change. To make matters worse, the British landed in Java in 1811 and took the island with a force of 12,000 men. The Gallicising of Java had long been a thorn in their side. Daendels' troops proved no match for them.

The new head of the administration was Thomas Stamford Raffles, and although he was British, he had absorbed Enlightenment ideals just as thoroughly as Daendels and was, if anything, yet more dauntless. He set out to territorialise the overseas area, to establish

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firm borders and, as far as possible, one contiguous territory, and to centralise the administration. He continued to chip away at the power of the native aristocracy, allowing only a few principalities in central Java to remain. And because the land that had belonged to the local rulers came into the hands of the state, every peasant now had to pay the colonial authorities at least one-quarter of their harvest in tax, sometimes as much as half. Although this new tax system was imposed only very gradually, it was a critical step in the development of the colony; the administration was expanding its influence over the lives of the inhabitants. Raffles made very specific, practical rules, even regulating how people moved. On the Great Post Road and other roads, he required horses and coaches to keep to the left, just as they did in Britain. That traffic rule is still respected, more or less, to this day; Indonesia is one of the very few former colonies where cars drive on the opposite side of the road to the mother country. The tireless Raffles also wrote the first, voluminous history of Java before moving on to a new project: founding the city-state of Singapore.[22] That's the kind of man he was.

Despite their brief terms of office, Daendels's three years and Raffles's five, their perseverance laid the groundwork for the entire colonial project. They reduced the influence of the aristocracy, established a central role for the state and set in motion the gradual process of transforming the old political order into a modern regime. Almost all their attention went to Java, but the transformation they effected there was the germ of all that followed. A bewildering patchwork of feudal principalities began its transformation into a single territory under a unified administration, with nationalised land that could be crossed on horseback, even if only on the left side of the road. The Netherlands, in power for 350 years? The true beginning was not a Dutch but a French and British initiative.

The fourth leader to work on the jigsaw puzzle was King William I. In 1813, the Netherlands had become independent again, and after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 it was expanded to include the territory of the later Belgium. For the new Kingdom of the Netherlands to function properly as a buffer state against France, it had to

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resume control of its overseas territories. So Britain had to loosen its grip on its recent conquests, but did so with great reluctance, keeping the Cape, Ceylon and the Indian trading stations for itself while returning Java to Dutch control. This is when it really began to make sense to speak of the Dutch East Indies (or Netherlands East Indies); the mercantilism of the VOC had been supplanted by Dutch colonialism. The new constitution gave the king absolute power in all colonial matters.[23] At first, William I continued along the same lines as Daendels and Raffles. Land remained the property of the state, and farmers could lease tracts in exchange for a portion of the crop. In the central Javanese principalities, the leases were awarded by the local aristocrats. When that led to wrongdoing and exploitation, the Dutch administration abolished the system. Prince Diponegoro, the eldest son of the Sultan of Yogyakarta, rebelled against the change, setting off the protracted Java War (1825–30). This was not a traditional battlefield encounter of the Napoleonic variety but an asymmetrical conflict in which Diponegoro used guerrilla tactics, like so many twentieth-century freedom fighters after him.

The Java War was the final attempt by the old Javanese aristocracy to contest foreign subjugation. It was unsuccessful: large areas of central Java were annexed by the colony, and only the south remained more or less autonomous, in the form of four principalities: Surakarta, Yogyakarta, Mangkunegaran and Pakualaman. The war cost the lives of 15,000 soldiers on the Dutch side, 8,000 of them European. On the Javanese side, the suspected death count is 200,000, one tenth in battle and the others due to hardship and famine.[24] It was an even deadlier conflict than the later war of independence from 1945 to 1949. When Diponegoro, after many years, agreed to negotiate with the Netherlands, the Dutch dishonourably clapped him in irons and banished him to Sulawesi. 'The Dutch are bad at heart,' he wrote during his lifelong exile.[25] Paying lip service to equality and then showing no respect for their opponent – this was a mistake Dutch authorities would often make during the Revolusi. No wonder Diponegoro grew into an icon of the anti-colonial resistance.

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Pratomo was sitting up straight in his chair, telling me about his life. Then he interrupted himself: 'Does it seem at all plausible, what

I'm telling you? My memories are crumbling away.' I nodded. His stories fascinated me. Though he sometimes stopped and stared at the floor as if an unfinished sentence was a cup that had slipped from his hand, at other times his memory was crystal-clear. And what he had to say never failed to interest me. Take, for example, what he told me about his name, which in full was Raden Mas Djajeng Pratomo. 'Raden Mas is an aristocratic title. It means something like baron or viscount.' But in conversation with me, he didn't stand on ceremony; he invited me to call him 'Prat', like everyone else. 'I was born in Sumatra,' he said, 'but I really come from Java.'[26] I also learned that he came from one of the last four surviving principalities: Pakualaman, to the southwest of Yogyakarta. Maybe he was even a distant relative of Prince Diponegoro. His great-grandfather had been first in the order of succession, in any case, but he had left the palace behind him for good in dissatisfaction with the growing dominance of the Dutch and the loose morals that prevailed at court.[27] His decision had far-reaching consequences: Pratomo was the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son of the crown prince. He could have been a Javanese ruler, but instead here he was in a retirement home on the coast of Holland, munching on poffertjes.

As for that other monarch, William I, the Dutch king had great financial ambitions for his colony, but the Java War had cost a fortune, the tax system was not raising enough money and, to his great frustration, the year 1830 brought the secession of another Dutch territory he'd been exploiting for profit: Belgium. He had to say goodbye to the very substantial revenue from the Ghent textile industry and the coal mines in Wallonia. Until 1839, he continued to throw vast sums of money into the war against Belgium. It didn't help. Where could he compensate for the lost income? In the colonies, of course. 'If I cannot defend my kingdom,' he once grumbled, 'then I shall flood Holland and set sail for the Indies.'[28] What he could no longer squeeze out of Belgium would just have to come from the East. The ensuing exploitation of the Indonesian population was the indirect result of the Belgian struggle for freedom.

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The king adopted an entirely new approach to colonial taxation: instead of claiming a fraction of each harvest, he forced the locals to

dedicate some of their land to crops that could be exported at a profit. This was known as the Cultivation System (*cultuurstelsel*). Farmers had to devote twenty per cent of their land to crops that the colonial administration could auction off for a hefty profit on the Amsterdam exchanges, through the agency of a national trading society that William had founded: the Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij (NHM). Peasants with no arable land had to perform sixty-six days of *corvée*, a fancy word for unpaid work for the authorities – essentially, a form of forced labour. Countless Javanese peasants who grew sweet potatoes, coconuts, papayas and rice for their own use were also required to produce coffee, tea, tobacco, sugar, quinine or indigo, commodities that were of little or no use to them. They were paid wages for the crops they delivered, but because the cost of leasing land rose each year, their profit margins remained very small. In rural areas of the colony, the people who really profited from the system were the Chinese and European manufacturers who did the initial processing of the harvest (pressing sugarcane and drying tea and tobacco). But the greatest profits were made in Europe. The higher up the ladder, the richer the rewards.

A colonial administration was put in place to collect the crops. The governor-general, assisted by the Council of the Indies, appointed European officials in all parts of the colony. The highest in rank were known as residents and assistant residents. They were the equals, and later the superiors, of the local native leaders (the former aristocrats), who became known as regents. Java had sixty-eight regents,[29] who were still highly esteemed by the local population. Pratomo's grandfather, for instance, the son of the crown prince who had renounced his claim, became the regent of Wates, an area to the south of Yogyakarta. He must have been an impressive sight; he travelled on horseback, and young Pratomo and his other grandchildren had to kneel humbly before him with their hands on their chests and then leave the room by walking backwards. Their world was steeped in hierarchy and cultural heritage: Pratomo was initiated into the secrets of traditional Javanese dance. Although the regents tended to lead lives of great luxury, in terms of actual power they were subordinate to the colonial rulers. In short, local administration in the Dutch

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colony was dual in nature, with a regent alongside a resident. In principle, the European resident (or assistant resident) oversaw the activities of the Javanese regent, but in practice the relationship was often reversed. The Dutch official was usually young and less experienced, had no local network and remained in that office for just a few years, while the native regent was older and completely bound up with his region, family and status. How could you persuade a person like that to go along with a thoroughly European idea like the Cultivation System? The solution was simple: offer him a bonus. By basing a portion of his wages on the size of the crop he delivered, the Dutch hoped to increase productivity. No doubt this system did inspire some native administrators to work harder, but of course it also left the door wide open to exploitation. Many regents subjected their people to decades of ruthless extortion, soon demanding that they devote not twenty but forty per cent of their land to commercial crops. The sixty-six days of unpaid labour for the colonial regime soon became 200. King William I's Cultivation System was incredibly lucrative, even decades after the end of his reign in 1840. It yielded 823 million guilders between 1831 and 1877 and often accounted for more than half of annual tax revenue.[30] The Netherlands and Spain were the only two countries to exploit their colonies in this direct fashion.[31] In the 1850s, the Cultivation System yielded more than a third of Dutch public revenue, and this was no secret.[32] In his annual Speech from the Throne in 1859, King William III discussed 'the highly satisfactory state of the national finances' and acknowledged that this was 'largely the fruit of the benefits provided to the Nation by possessions in the East Indies'.[33] But meanwhile, his colonial subjects were being reduced to penury, as famine swept one of the world's most fertile regions. In the years 1846 and 1847, tens of thousands of people died in fever epidemics in central Java.[34] In 1851 and 1864, there were large-scale outbreaks of cholera.[35] Health care was nearly non-existent.

It was against this harrowing backdrop that, in a garret in Brussels, a former colonial official who had resigned in disgrace wrote the scathing protest recognised today as the greatest Dutch-language novel of the nineteenth century: Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860).[36]

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Under the new constitution of 1848, colonial policy was no longer the king's private playground but a public matter, the business of the Dutch government and parliament. Newspapers wrote about it, and members of the public weighed in.[37] Multatuli, the pen name of Eduard Douwes Dekker, did so with exceptional panache, or, as one contemporary put it, 'with a heat, a fire, a passion, an outrage – an all-consuming, unrelenting hatred of the system – that finally seems to have rudely awakened the Netherlands'.[38] His book was a motley collection of stories, letters, speeches, meditations, essays, poems and satire, but what undoubtedly touched the hearts of Dutch readers the most was the parable of Saijah and Adinda, the lovers whose lives were torn apart and destroyed by colonial politics. It was a tale of humiliation and impoverishment, of exploitation and embitterment and, ultimately, of radicalisation and resistance. This was the Dutch equivalent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with all the magnificent formal chaos of *Moby-Dick* and the offhand but deadly wit of Guy de Maupassant or Turgenev.

Seldom has a single book so excited the masses.[39] The socialist leader Domela Nieuwenhuis called on the lower house of parliament to abolish the colonies, but that went too far for most, including Multatuli.[40] The majority agreed that the colonial regime should be made more humane and the Cultivation System should be abandoned. In 1860 the Netherlands abolished slavery, well after England (1833) and France (1848), although the practice persisted for many years in remote areas.[41] From that time onwards, the discredited Cultivation System was replaced, step by step, by the plantation system, in which agriculture was controlled not by the state but by private capital. Dutch companies were allowed to lease government land to set up plantations. The losses from the demise of the Cultivation System were more than made up for by new tax revenue.[42] Planters produced mainly coffee, tobacco and sugar in eastern Java, indigo and sugar in central Java and tea and quinine (from cinchona bark) in western Java. The state leased not only land but also licenses to provide services or other economic activities, which left the companies free to conduct those activities however they saw fit. For instance, there were licenses for selling salt and opium, running a pawnshop or a gambling house,

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collecting tolls or taxes, trading in trees, sponges, pearls or edible birds' nests and so forth. The Chinese middle class showed particular enthusiasm for this system, which became a major source of revenue.[43]

In this fourth stage of putting together the jigsaw puzzle, the emphasis was not solely on Java. After the death of William I, three large-scale military expeditions to Bali were mounted (in 1846, 1848 and 1849). That was possible because, after the Java War, William I had expanded his colonial forces into the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger; KNIL), a full-scale colonial army that was separate from the Dutch military in Europe. Almost half the KNIL troops were European; the others came from Ambon, Sulawesi, Madura, Java and Sumatra and even from West Africa. From 1831 to 1872, some 3,000 soldiers went to the Indies from what are now Ghana and Burkina Faso. *Belanda hitam*, they were called: 'black Dutchmen'.[44] The plan was for this mixed-race professional army to put down local uprisings in Java and conquer the rest of the archipelago step by step. Bali was the first great test. In the expeditions of the 1840s, more than 12,000 people died. The KNIL had proved the superiority of its firepower. Yet it took the Dutch more than fifty years after that to subjugate the island completely. In the 1850s, the KNIL also fought for parts of Borneo, southern Sulawesi and the centre and east coast of Sumatra. Jigsaw puzzles could be a bloody business, but so be it; huge areas of land were added to the colony by military force. By the end of this period, in 1870, the Dutch had taken Java and were ready to rake in the rest.

In the fifth stage, from 1870 to 1914, the jigsaw was completed. This stage saw the greatest territorial expansion, with more than half of the colony's final territory first conquered – very late in the day. The KNIL conducted as many as thirty campaigns, ranging from minor incursions to long-drawn-out wars.[45] They attacked the Balinese in Lombok, the Batak and Minangkabau peoples in Sumatra, the Dayaks in Borneo, and the native inhabitants of Sulawesi, Flores, Sumbawa, Seram and the Riouw (now Riau) Islands. The whole archipelago reeked of gunpowder. These campaigns were euphemistically called

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