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Achinese War

Date: 1873–1907

From: *Encyclopedia of Wars*, vol. 1

PRINCIPAL COMBATANTS: The Netherlands vs. Aceh

PRINCIPAL THEATER(S): Northeastern Sumatra

DECLARATION: None

MAJOR ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES: The Dutch sought to quell piracy in the East Indies, subjugate the Achinese Muslims, and colonize all of Indonesia; the Achinese sought to maintain their independence and continue their lucrative raids against imperial trade.

OUTCOME: More than a quarter century of bitter guerrilla warfare culminated in Dutch control of Aceh.

APPROXIMATE MAXIMUM NUMBER OF MEN UNDER ARMS: Dutch, 10,500; Achinese, unknown

CASUALTIES: Dutch, 2,317 killed; Achinese, 11,187 killed

TREATIES: Treaty of 1903

By the mid-19th century Indonesia had long been colonized by both English and Dutch commercial interests, drawn by the lucrative spice and tobacco trades. With the advent of steam power and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the trade grew even more profitable, enhancing the economic and political appeal of the Indonesian colonies. For centuries pirates from Aceh, or Achin (today called Atjeh), in northern Sumatra had raided both English and Dutch trading vessels with near impunity.

Though a problem for both Britain and the Netherlands, Indonesian pirates embarrassed the Dutch more, since they had for so long claimed that the Dutch East India Company controlled the island chain as one big colonial trading juggernaut. Such a claim had made them traditionally responsible for security in the region. With the opening of the Suez Canal, however, most of the East Indian commercial traffic was rerouted for efficiency through the Strait of Malacca, which was controlled by the British. The two colonial powers reached a modus vivendi in the East Indies: The British would allow the Dutch passage through the strait and turn a blind eye to their handling of the Achinese problem—if, in return, the Dutch abolished the higher rates they charged for non-Dutch shipping and permitted British-held Singapore to continue its trade with the regions of Sumatra that the Dutch had recently subjugated.

After the British recognized the Dutch interest in Aceh, the Netherlands in 1873 launched two armed expeditionary forces to conquer the rebellious Achinese Muslims, bring the pirate raids to an end, and establish Dutch dominance throughout all of Sumatra. Dutch forces quickly seized the Achinese palace in the regional capital, Kutaradja. However, an epidemic of cholera struck the Dutch forces, and a long and ugly guerrilla war followed. For 20 years the Dutch tried to root the Achinese guerrillas out of the Sumatran jungles until the bitter war began to absorb Dutch Indonesia's annual trade surplus. With profits falling, the Dutch in 1893 made a concerted effort to win the hearts and minds of the natives who did not openly support the rebels by enlisting the

aid of a local chief, to whom they offered a position of high rank in their proposed colonial government. The plan backfired two years later when the chief spurned the colonials and took all his followers with him to the rebels.

It took another decade for the Dutch to gain the upper hand. In 1903 Muhammad Daud, sultan of Aceh, sick of the fighting, concluded a treaty with the Netherlands, recognizing Dutch sovereignty and relinquishing his throne. Many of the Achinese rebels, however, refused to accept Dutch rule and took to the jungles again, continuing to wage guerrilla war. Caught in a quagmire in which they had already invested too much, the Dutch embarked on a "castle strategy," systematically building garrisons and fortifications for Dutch troops across the island. In 1907, with the Dutch treasury all but empty and the Dutch colonists universally despised throughout Indonesia, the Netherlands finally managed to crush the Achinese resistance. At long last, the Dutch ruled unchecked over the Spice Islands and dominated the spice and tobacco trade.



Further Information

Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands Indies, 1400–1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).



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