

Siamese-Dutch Tensions in the Seventeenth Century



8 ▼ LETTER TO THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The Dutch, having won their political independence from Spain at the close of the sixteenth century, immediately and aggressively entered the competition for profits in Asia. This weakened the commercial empire of Portugal, which lacked the wealth and organization to maintain its position against the Dutch East India Company, a joint stock company founded in 1602 and backed by the Dutch government, which had ample capital, military muscle, and a board of directors in Amsterdam (known as "the Seventeen") that controlled its operations. The fall of Melaka to the Dutch in 1641 ended the Portuguese empire in Southeast Asia except on the island of Timor, which the Portuguese held until the twentieth century. The Dutch also took political control of Java and the Moluccas and defeated or weakened regional challengers such as the kingdom of Aceh.

As the following document shows, however, even with their wealth and organization, the Dutch still needed to cultivate good relations with the region's rulers to be successful. This letter was written by an agent of the Dutch East India Company stationed in Jakarta to the Seventeen in 1655. He expressed his concern about a diplomatic problem with the king of Siam (modern Thailand) and its implications for Dutch trade and prestige. Siam, with its capital to the north of Bangkok in Ayutthaya, was the strongest monarchy in Southeast Asia, with leaders who were skillful in playing off one European power against another. The letter was prompted by Siamese anger over the recent Dutch blockade of Tenneserim, a city in a Siamese vassal state on the Bay of Bengal, and the refusal of the Dutch to help the Siamese king suppress a rebellion in Singgora, another vassal state on the Bay of Siam.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How would you characterize Siamese attitudes toward the Dutch?
2. How did the Dutch resident Westerwolt react when the Siamese court became antagonistic toward the Dutch? What does his behavior reveal about Dutch attitudes toward the Siamese?
3. According to the author and Westerwolt, how might the Dutch be weakened by their disfavor with the king?
4. How in the short run did the Dutch try to solve their problems with the unhappy Siamese king?
5. What does the document reveal about the competition the Dutch were facing from the English in Southeast Asia?