

The Impact of the French Revolution: Enter Daendels

Worried that the British might invade Java, King Louis sent Marshal Herman Willem Daendels to secure the island as governor-general of Java. He avoided the British **naval blockade** and arrived at Batavia on 5 January 1808. Napoleon had previously made Daendels the only non-French marshal, which suggests he had very great ability. He also had a darker side. Daendels had tremendous energy, but could be **ruthless** and often used force to achieve his ends. As an example, two rebels from Cirebon were killed in horrific ways by his forces. The first was **hacked to death** by Dutch cavalry, while the second was burnt alive.

A major problem for Daendels was the **local Javanese courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta**. They were so powerful that they could have allied with the British against the Dutch. In particular, the court of Yogyakarta, was a huge potential threat because of its military power and wealth.

Daendels determined to change the situation to his advantage. He decided to do so by using the Dutch **residents** to impose his will on the Javanese courts. This was a massive shock to the local rulers, who saw themselves as supreme in the centre and west of Java. They saw the residents as **joint servants** of the Dutch and the local rulers, but Daendels changed all of that. The old order on Java was changing for ever.

The geography of Java made communications difficult so Daendels decided to improve communications by building **the Great Post Road**. Magnificent as the achievement was, it is important to remember that it was not without a huge cost. It is estimated that **12,000 Javanese laborers** lost their lives in its construction.



The Dutch government was **virtually bankrupt** due to the British naval blockade and its military forces were unreliable and poorly trained. Daendels decided to solve his money problems by

controlling economic resources such as timber by giving the Dutch a **monopoly**. This caused difficulties for locals who relied on the timber for housing and trade. It also further damaged relations with the **local nobility** who made money from selling the rights to harvest timber. Daendels also built up the **colonial government's military might** so that he would be able to use them to enforce his will on the local courts, and protect against any **future British invasion**.

The **simmering tensions** between the Yogya court and the Dutch came to the boil over the issue of robber bands in lands bordering the Dutch area. Daendels told the Yogya sultan that he would be held personally responsible if another robbery took place. When one did, Daendels demanded the death of Radèn Tirtawijaya, the noble responsible for the area in which the robbery took place. The Yogya ruler offered to send him into **exile** instead, but Daendels demanded a far worse punishment. The unfortunate man was bound and delivered in chains to Semarang. There he was shot and his body dumped by the side of the road.

Hatred of Daendels' regime would lead to open conflict. Radèn Rongga, a minor noble, **rebelled** against the Dutch from 1809 to 1810. The rebellion failed and Rongga was cut to pieces. Daendels now had a **pretext** to raid the very **wealthy Yogyakarta treasury**. The Marshal travelled to Yogya to take **substantial loot** for his officers and men from the Sultan's treasury. Daendels' deputy, Van Braam, received 10,000 Spanish dollars, while other senior Dutch took some 5,000 Spanish dollars each. This was not be the last time Yogyakarta was looted by European forces.

Daendels then **imposed treaties** on the Sultan to take over more land from the Yogya court. The Sultan was left humiliated and searching for a way to strike back against the Dutch even after Daendels left Java in 1811 just before the British invasion. However, if the Sultan thought that things were going to be better for the local courts under British rule, he would be sorely disappointed.

Tasks

1. Skim through the reading and check the meaning of all the words **in bold**. If you do not know them, then look them up and write the meanings down. Make sure you test yourself on these new words at the end of the lesson and for homework.
2. What evidence is there in the passage that Daendels had great ability?
3. What evidence is there in the passage that Daendels was a ruthless man?
4. What evidence is there in the passage that the local courts were unhappy with Daendels?
5. What do Daendels' actions suggest about his personality and views? Create his personality profile
6. How and why might a historical figure like Daendels be seen in different ways by different people? Here are some examples to help you consider this i) A Javanese labourer working on the Post Road ii) A Javanese noble in 1810 iii) A Dutch resident in 1860? iv) An Indonesian nationalist



in 1945? v) A historian writing in the 21st Century looking at the development of modern Indonesia?