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TEACHER RESOURCE - A Brief History of the United East
India Company (VOC)
Learning sequence 2

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TEACHER RESOURCE - A Brief History of the United East India Company (VOC)

Beginning in 1602 the VOC (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) or United (Dutch) East India Company was created by the Dutch government to coordinate the profitable Asian trade. A board of seventeen directors representing major port towns across the Netherlands was established to administer the VOC. The directors were called *Heeren XVII* (Gentlemen 17) and their aim was to achieve very high profits for the VOC shareholders. The wealthiest town or chamber of the VOC was the city of Amsterdam. All VOC ships bore the first letter of their city of origin, for example A for Amsterdam, D for Delft and so on. To pursue profit maximisation the VOC was granted extensive powers by the Dutch government. The company had authority to:

- have its own army,
- sign treaties with foreign countries,
- build forts to protect its employees and merchandise,
- mint its own currency,
- select governors to administer overseas territories.

Senior VOC employees, the Upper-merchant and Under-merchant, were always among the crew on *Retourschips*, as well as soldiers and a range of weapons to ensure VOC profit-making was at the forefront of all decision-making. In 1608 there were 40 VOC ships, with around 5,000 crewmen in Asia. By 1688 there were 11,551 employees and over 200 ships, while by 1700 over 18,100 were employed by the VOC in the Asian sector. In the period between 1595 and 1795 nearly 4800 voyages were made by Dutch trading ships to the Far East, with a loss of about 4% of the ships over these years.

VOC control over the spice trade in the East Indies, now known as Indonesia, was extended by both negotiation and violence. The following events provide some evidence of this:

In 1605 Dutch soldiers captured Ambon and Tidore and fought to remove the Portuguese from the Moluccas (now called Maluku, also known as Spice Islands).

In 1610 the VOC was granted permission to have a warehouse at Jayakarta (Jakarta) on the island of Java where they fought the English and local princes, destroyed the town and in 1619 built the fortified city of Batavia which became central to the administration of Dutch trade in the region.

The Dutch set up factories and supply bases in India, Taiwan and Cape Town.

The VOC captured Malacca from Portugal in 1641, Sri Lanka in 1656 - 58 and the Malabar Coast in 1661.

During the 1600s the VOC was the wealthiest company in the world and has been called the first multinational company. The power of the company was extended by the notorious VOC Director General, Jan Pieterszoon Coen. Based in Batavia, Coen was the Director General of commerce in Asia from 1614 to 1623 and from 1627 to 1629. Under Coen's rule the Dutch ruthlessly extended their control over the spice trade in the East Indies. With the aim of high profits, creating a monopoly and punishing local tribes for not following VOC instructions, Coen expanded Dutch power in the following ways:

- In 1621 Coen ordered the murder of natives on Banda Island in the Moluccas to create monopoly control over the nutmeg industry.
- On the island of Ambon in 1623, eighteen English traders were arrested, accused of conspiring against the Dutch and were subsequently tried and executed.
- In 1622 Coen sent a delegation to China which led to the establishment of a Dutch settlement on Formosa (present day Taiwan). This became the base for ongoing trade with Japan and China.

The VOC existed for nearly 200 years, from 1602 until 1799, when growing competition, changing trade patterns, private profiteering and corruption caused the VOC to become bankrupt. In 1800 the Dutch government took control of the areas administered by the VOC and extended their control throughout the East Indies during the 1820s and 1830s. This colonisation of the Spice Islands created the Dutch East Indies which remained under Dutch control until the Republic of Indonesia was established in 1949.

The "Colonial Voyage" website below has a section on the Dutch East India Company. Click on the link provided below or write "Colonial Voyage Dutch East India Company" into your search engine.

<http://www.colonialvoyage.com/dutch-east-india-company-voc-verenigde-oostindische-compagnie/>