



Southeast Asia and World War I

In this video, Trevor Getz interviews Heather Streets-Salter about how the First World War affected Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia was a complicated place in 1914. British, French, American, Dutch and Japanese empires claimed control of much of the region. The region was home to many Chinese people and Muslims, who had broad transnational interests. The centerpiece of this video is Singapore, where one captured German submarine crew helped spark an uprising against the British colonial government. The uprising had many transnational connections to India, Europe, and San Francisco.



00:01

Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University

Pre-War Southeast Asia

GETZ: Hello, my name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of history at San Francisco State University, and I'm here today with one of my favorite historians, Heather Streets-Salter, to talk about the First World War from an unusual perspective: not Europe, but Southeast Asia.

Heather, let's start just by asking you to tell me what Southeast Asia looked like in 1914.

00:36

An animated map shows the areas of Southeast Asia that were colonized: only a small portion of the region was independent at the time

STREETS-SALTER: So, Southeast Asia was a... Kind of a complicated place in 1914. Much of it was colonized by European powers. So, the British had colonized what is now Malaysia and Singapore, and that was in the colony of British Malaya. The Dutch had colonized what is now the archipelago of Indonesia, and they called it the Dutch East Indies, or the Netherlands East Indies. The French had colonized what is now Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and that was called French Indochina. And the Americans had colonized what is now the Philippines after the Spanish-American War of 1898. So, a lot of it was colonized. There was one independent place, and that was Siam. And Siam was sort of sandwiched in between British India and French Indochina.

01:26

A photo of a large crowd of people arriving at Mecca

Photo of a nationalist army

GETZ: What kinds of things were people in Southeast Asia generally thinking about and concerned with in 1914, just before the war began?

STREETS-SALTER: If you look at the Muslim-dominated places, like the Dutch East Indies and parts of British Malaya, there are a lot of people who are really interested in what's happening in the Middle East and in the Ottoman Empire, because, starting in the late 19th century, more and more people—thousands of people every year—made the Hajj, which is the pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca. Also, if you look at sort of the other direction, there were a lot of Chinese people in Southeast Asia, and they were very, very interested in what was happening in China. And in 1911, the Qing Empire was overthrown and the Nationalists actually took over for a little while—it becomes complicated quickly.

02:17

*An animated map shows the size of Japan compared to Russia – it is much smaller!
Painting of a Japanese military ship*

But Southeast Asian Chinese were extremely important because they were very wealthy, and both sides—the Qing Empire and the Nationalists, before the revolution in 1911—had tried to court Southeast Asian Chinese, mostly because they had a lot of money and they could donate money to the various causes. And I guess the final thing, sort of in a global way, that a lot of people are really interested in Southeast Asia in around 1914, is the fact that the Japanese had recently beat the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War that ended in 1905. This sent shock waves around the world, actually. But in Southeast Asia, it was amazing to many people who opposed colonialism, because Europeans had basically said, "No Asian could ever beat a European power." And that's exactly what happened when the Japanese beat the Russians.

03:25

A black and white photo of Singapore in the early 1900s – people ride in carriages

GETZ: Okay, let's zoom in on just one part of Southeast Asia. What can you tell us about Singapore in 1914? Who ruled it? Who lived there? How did people make money?

STREETS-SALTER: Okay, so, Singapore is a cool place, because this is a small city. It's got about 140,000 people in 1914. About three-quarters of them,

and the streets are not crowded

Photo of a port in Singapore; many small ships are in the sea

04:15

maybe slightly less than three-quarters, are Chinese. There's a sizable Malay population, there's a sizable Indian population, and then there's a few thousand Europeans and mixed-race Europeans—they called them Eurasians. So it's, it's a small city. It's really incredibly well situated for trade. (laughs): Still is, because it's in the same place, but it sort of connects the South China Sea and China with places to the West, who... India and the rest of the world, including Europe.

The British had taken Singapore in 1819 in a deal with a Malay prince. They took it because it was this sort of island situated so well in the trade routes in Southeast Asia. And the garrison that they had there, they always garrisoned it with Indian troops.

GETZ: I know you write about a mutiny that took place in Singapore in 1915. Why did that happen? What had inspired the mutineers?

04:43

Art depicts a submarine coming out of the water beside a large ship

Photo of men standing on top of the submarine

"Sepoy: An Indian soldier serving under British orders"

STREETS-SALTER: So, you have this one regiment that I mentioned before. It's an Indian regiment that's stationed still in Singapore in 1914, when the war breaks out. And... There's a... A couple of crazy things that are happening. First of all, you don't think about submarine warfare in Southeast Asia as part of the war, but there had been a German sub that had taken off from German territories in China, and it had been sort of harassing all of Southeast Asia, and even India, in the early part of the war, in the fall of 1914. And finally, that submarine was sunk. And it was sunk not far from Singapore. And the people who had been manning that submarine, the Germans, were actually brought to a prison in Singapore. So they were brought there, and the Indian sepoys that were garrisoning the town, some of them were assigned to guard them.

05:39

An image of a document called "The Balance Sheet of British Rule in India"

And so, one of the things that was happening is that the German soldiers who had been captured from that submarine had—it was called the Emden, that was the name of the submarine—had been talking to the sepoys about how they should turn sides and support the Germans instead. And the German prisoners were saying, "Hey, guys, if you help us get out, we will make sure there's a boat waiting for you, you can escape." Because the penalty for mutiny was always death. So all of these things are churning around. And then there's this revolutionary group that actually starts in San Francisco. There are these Indians who decide that the only way to get rid of the British is to have a revolution. They end up calling themselves Ghadar, which means "mutiny." And when the war breaks out, they say, "Hey, we should try to talk to the Germans and the Ottomans, because an enemy of an enemy is my friend." So they decided to work with the Germans and the Ottomans to see if they could disrupt things in the British Empire. So Ghadar representatives begin going all over the place, including Singapore. And so the sepoys, who are mostly Muslim, begin to hear things from Ghadar revolutionaries, from imams in the mosques, and from the Germans in the camp where they're being held.

07:12

So the sepoys take the opportunity as they're filling up an ammunition wagon that afternoon, on February 15—it's a holiday in Singapore because it's the Chinese New Year, so things are quiet—and they take the opportunity to begin shooting and start a mutiny. That's, that's how the mutiny begins.

GETZ: So, how was the mutiny put down at the end?

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STREETS-SALTER: Well, I mean, unfortunately for the people who decided to mutiny, it was a very quick event. Only half of the regiment decided to mutiny. They killed, I think it was seven or nine civilians. They did go to the British prison and liberate the Germans. But the long and the short of it is that the mutiny was quickly put down. It only was a major threat for a couple of days. And many sepoys were killed in the process, about 52 of them, and then another 41 were executed after they were caught. So it was unsuccessful. But the reason it intrigues me is because it brings together all these global currents in this one event, where people actually decide to take action based on global events that they're hearing about.

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I think the mutiny would've been put down—probably not as quickly—anyway, by the British, because it was pretty uncoordinated and there wasn't strong leadership. But it was put down even quicker than it would have been on its own because the British called in naval forces from the surrounding ocean. So, they called in basically anybody who was their ally. And who were their allies in World War I? It was the French, the Russians, and the Japanese. And each of those powers sent ships to help the British retake the island and secure it during that time. And so, basically, these ships just came in, they landed their soldiers, and they helped round up the rest of the regiment that was now hiding in the jungles.

A map shows the location of Britain's allies – Russia, Japan, and France (French Indo-China)- the allies surround Singapore

09:27

Viewing World War I from Southeast Asia

GETZ: So here's a really important question to bring things together. How does the First World War look different when viewed from Southeast Asia? And why is it worth looking at the war from a perspective other than Europe?

Photo of armed soldiers waiting in a trench

STREETS-SALTER: Yeah, that's a great question, and it's a question that I really like to talk about a lot, because, so, we have our images from World War I in Europe, right? We always think about the trenches, trench warfare, the blood, the massive environmental destruction, the loss of life—things like that. In Southeast Asia, it doesn't look like that at all. I mean, you have the submarine battles, and the German prisoners, and the mutiny, and things like that. But you also have... The fact that you have the European powers who were involved in the war automatically draws in all of the colonies that are involved. It disrupts all kinds of trade. There's almost no communication between the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands for almost a year, because the British actually end up being in command of all the sea lanes. Or there's places like Indochina that sends colonial troops, and that has an impact, as well. I like to say that Southeast Asia didn't affect the outcome of the war on the Western Front, but that the war had a major impact all over Southeast Asia for all these other reasons, like we talked about with trade, and people, and alliances, and things like that.

*Text:
World War I in Southeast Asia:
- European war draws in colonies
- Disrupts trade
- British control sea routes
- Colonial troops fight in Europe*

GETZ: Heather, thank you for joining me today. It's been really interesting to learn about the First World War from a new perspective.