

JAPAN'S EXPANSION INTO THE DUTCH EAST INDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GREATER EAST ASIA WAR (1930–1945): AN ECONOMIC-POLITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Japan's survival strategy during the greater east asia war through its expansion into the Dutch East Indies from 1930 to 1945, as well as its impact on local communities. The main issues examined are the driving factors behind the expansion and the impact of the military occupation on the population. This study employs historical methods, examining primary sources such as newspaper archives and contemporary documentary photographs, as well as secondary sources in the form of books and scholarly articles. The results indicate that the motives for expansion were driven by wartime economic factors, military strategy, and the Hakko Ichiu ideology. The occupation had far-reaching political consequences through the dismantling of long-standing colonial structures, as well as the exploitation of natural and human resources, which worsened the socioeconomic conditions of the population. The study's conclusion affirms that this expansion was a vital survival strategy for Japan in the face of Western powers.

Keywords: Greater East Asia war; Japanese expansion; Japanese occupation; Survival strategy; Dutch East Indies.

INTRODUCTION

World War II was a continuation of world war i, also known as the great war—so named because of the immense scale of the conflict. Initially, World War I was considered the war to end all wars. However, from 1939 to 1945, another war of equal magnitude took place, with many of the same nations involved in World War II. World War II resulted in the deaths of approximately 70 to 85 million people, about 3% to 4% of the world's population (Arifianto, 2025, p. 1).

Japan was involved in World War II, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. The international order underwent tremendous upheaval due to military expansion and competition among major powers. Japan, which had prioritized modernization and industrialization since the Meiji era, began to adopt an aggressive foreign policy. Japan aspired to become an imperialist power in Asia. However, Japan's aggressive actions and ambitions were not supported by its limited resources. Japan faced an oil embargo imposed by the United States. As a result, Japan lost its fuel supplies for its industry and military, leading it to decide to expand its territory. Japan undertook this territorial expansion to secure the material resources it needed (Gunawan, 2022, p. 1).

The imposition of embargoes and sanctions particularly restrictions on the export of oil, steel, and strategic raw materials exacerbated Japan's vulnerability and accelerated its decision to seek resources from other regions. Consequently, Japan decided to expand into the southern regions, including the Dutch East Indies, which possessed abundant natural resources especially oil, which was its primary target. At the initiative of the Imperial Japanese Navy, the theory of expansion to the South was proposed as one way to resolve Japan's crisis. This theory was subsequently systematized as the "National Policy Guidelines" (*Koku-Saku no Kijun*) in August 1936. Subsequently, in 1935–1936 before the "National Policy Criteria" were formulated Japanese Navy

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officers conducted surveys of various regions in Indonesia, which at that time was known as the Dutch East Indies (Goto, 1998, p. 10).

The year 1942 marked the beginning of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, which lasted until 1945. During that time, natural resources were continuously plundered from Indonesia for Japan's benefit. The Dutch East Indies held a strategic position. A modern military relies on robust resources. By controlling the ports, air bases, and transportation infrastructure in the Dutch East Indies, Japan could shorten supply lines, facilitate troop movements, and establish operational bases for further campaigns. In its effort to build an empire in Asia, Japan had ignited a war in the Pacific. On December 8, 1941, without warning, Japan invaded Southeast Asia and bombed Pearl Harbor. Then, on January 11, Japanese troops landed in Tarakan, East Kalimantan, and the Dutch surrendered on January 12, 1942 (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2019, p. 1).

However, Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo claimed that Japan's military invasion was not intended to exploit natural resources or for personal gain, as this was inconsistent with the spirit of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was based on a mutually beneficial relationship founded on the autonomy and independence of all parties, guided by initiative and leadership rather than conquest and subordination. This was done to establish a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The statement made by Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo was closely linked to Japanese propaganda regarding its expansion. Japan sought to convince the nations of Asia that its military invasion was not a new form of colonization, but rather part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere project. Japan wanted to emphasize that its goal was not the exploitation of resources or personal gain, but rather mutual benefit (Bachri, et al., 2023, p. 158).

In reality, Japan occupied Indonesia with the aim of exploiting its natural resources and mobilizing its workforce to support the Greater East Asia War. Japan entered the Dutch East Indies not only with military force but also with ideological propaganda. Slogans such as "*Saudara Tua*" and "Asia for Asians" were disseminated with the goal of convincing the indigenous population that the Japanese were liberators from Western colonialism. In reality, however, their practices could also be described as colonialism through military occupation. The initial hope that Japan's arrival would bring independence quickly faded, as the people actually suffered oppression, forced labor, and shortages of basic necessities. Furthermore, Japan spread an imperial-oriented military and nationalist ideology through youth training programs. However, amid this oppression, the spirit of Indonesian nationalism actually grew even stronger (Rut, et al., 2024, p. 2).

Japan used propaganda in its expansion because it needed ideological legitimacy to mask its military and economic ambitions. For example, Japan promoted the slogans "*Saudara Tua*" and "Asia for Asians" in an effort to build an image as the liberator of Asian nations from Western colonialism. Propaganda became a crucial strategy for Japan, as it served to control the minds and emotions of the people. Propaganda was necessary because military strength alone was insufficient to maintain dominance; thus, Japan formed mass organizations, promoted education in the Japanese language, and controlled the media to instill the idea that the peoples of Asia must unite under Japanese leadership. This allowed Japan to monopolize the natural resources and human resources of the Dutch East Indies to support the Greater East Asia War. Engaging in war and mobilizing support through propaganda helped maintain backing for the ongoing conflict, justify and legitimize specific actions during the war, direct public sympathy or opinion against other groups, weaken enemy forces, and motivate resistance or rebellion against the enemy government or military (Budiarto, et al., 2023, p. 57).

Japan's motive for invading the Dutch East Indies was to exploit the people's resources and labor for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Given the large population, the people were forced to contribute their labor. They were put to work building roads, bridges, and railroads, and digging mines, while basic necessities became increasingly scarce. Initially, the Japanese arrival offered hope for independence, but what followed was oppression and forced labor throughout the Japanese occupation. Japan's goal of dominating the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

required significant sacrifices and human resources. With a population of 59.1 million in the Dutch East Indies, people were conscripted into the military, as laborers, and as workers to build infrastructure and extract food and minerals for the war effort (Nurohmat, 2021, p. 54).

During the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, several new objectives emerged not only to control resources and strategic locations, but also to establish a socio-political structure that supported the mobilization of the people for the war effort. The ever-changing situation and conditions of the Greater East Asia War, which were not always favorable to Japan, required Japan to be more strategic, particularly in managing the supply of staple goods. In response to this situation, Japan implemented a policy of cultivating staple commodities, with rice being the primary focus. Japan established the Kokumintangari program a migration program to relocate the population to more strategic and fertile regions to support the war effort in the Greater East Asia War (Dilla, 2024, p. 1).

Based on the above discussion, numerous previous studies on the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies have been conducted with diverse focuses, ranging from the aspect of propaganda examined by Rut et al. (2024) and Budiarto et al. (2023) to the policies and systems of the Japanese military occupation in the Dutch East Indies discussed by Dilla (2024). However, the majority of these studies still have gaps because they tend to separate the international political-economic conditions that constrained Japan from the actual impacts on the ground, or are too fixated on the timeline starting only in 1942. Therefore, the author has titled this study "Japan's Expansion into the Dutch East Indies in the Context of the Greater East Asia War (1930–1945): An Economic-Political Approach." The choice of this theme is based on the desire to examine these dynamics from a more comprehensive perspective. The distinctiveness and novelty of this study lie in its deliberate decision to trace the historical narrative back to 1930 to establish a clear historical thread. The focus is on examining how global economic pressures and the U.S. embargo triggered Japan's involvement in the Greater East Asia War, ultimately forcing it to seek survival by seizing territory in the Dutch East Indies. Finally, this study will analyze how these global strategic decisions ultimately had a direct impact on the suffering of local communities under Japanese military control.

Based on the background described above, the main research question arises: How did the Greater East Asia War drive Japan to expand into the Dutch East Indies, and what were the impacts of the Japanese military occupation on the people of the Dutch East Indies? The hypothesis proposed is that Japan's expansion into the Dutch East Indies was driven by Japan's economic and political interests. In line with this, the objective of this study is to analyze the motives behind Japan's expansion into the Dutch East Indies in support of the Greater East Asia War, as well as the impacts felt by the population as a result of the Japanese military occupation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs the historical research method. The historical research method itself is the process of critically examining and analyzing records and artifacts from the past. An imaginative reconstruction of the past based on data obtained through that process is called historiography (Gottschalk, 1985). The political economy approach is defined as a framework of analysis that integrates economics and political science. Political decisions are influenced by economic interests, and conversely, economic factors shape political dynamics; power, in turn, can influence resource allocation, income distribution, and economic stability. Bruno S. Frey defines political economy as a body of theories based on an understanding of the interdependence between economics and politics (Mufti, 2018).

This historical research followed five stages: (1) topic selection not merely choosing a topic considered interesting, but selecting a historical topic that could be researched; (2) collection of sources, including primary sources (photographic archives and newspapers) and secondary sources (books and scholarly articles). The primary sources used in this study consist of the Asia Raya newspaper from 1942 and photographic archives obtained from the KITLV; (3) verification, which involves critically evaluating the available sources through internal and external criticism to

establish the credibility and authenticity of the obtained sources; (4) interpretation: interpreting the data through analysis and synthesis, then assessing its suitability and synthesizing it to draw conclusions; (5) writing: reporting the compiled data; in this study, the results to be reported take the form of a scholarly paper (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). This study focuses on the motives behind Japan's expansion into the Dutch East Indies, which began in 1930 to meet the needs of the Greater East Asia War, as well as the impact of the Japanese military occupation that lasted until 1945.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Japanese Expansion in the Dutch East Indies

Background of the Greater East Asia War

The Greater East Asia War was a large-scale naval conflict that took place during World War II. The Greater East Asia War also known as the Pacific War was referred to by the Japanese as the "Greater East Asia War," while Europeans referred to it as the "Pacific War" or "Pacific Theater" (Takou, 2014, p. 5). The Greater East Asia War began with Japan's attack on the United States on December 7, 1941, when Japan successfully launched an air raid on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (Dilla, 2024, p. 1).

The attack on Pearl Harbor was prompted by U.S. measures to pressure Japan through an embargo on iron exports in 1940, followed by a ban on oil shipments to Japan in 1941 (Wati, 2019, p. 8). The trade embargo was imposed because the United States opposed Japan's invasion of Manchuria (1930), followed by China (1937), and then French Indochina (1940) (Arifianto, 2025, pp. 6-7). The imposition of the embargo made conditions difficult for Japan, as the country had long relied on other nations for raw materials. Without imports of oil and steel, the Japanese military would not have been able to sustain the war for long.

President Roosevelt ordered the trade embargo with the aim that the resulting economic pressure would corner Japan, thereby compelling it to end its military expansion in East Asia (Arifianto, 2025, p. 7). On the other hand, the Japanese Navy was vigorously promoting the Nanshin-ron plan (expansion to the South). Consequently, the embargo did not prompt Japan to surrender but rather spurred it to attack U.S. military forces. Notonegoro noted that three months before the attack was launched, on September 6, 1941, Japan made the decision that if no agreement was reached in negotiations with the Allies by October 1941, Japan would immediately declare its readiness to wage war against the Allies (Ishak, 2012, p. 4).

Japan's situation became increasingly desperate, forcing it to seek alternative sources of oil in the Dutch East Indies. Japan acted swiftly by launching a massive military deployment to Southeast Asia and engaging in negotiations with the United States in Washington. No agreement was reached, so Japan chose to sever ties with the United States, followed by the attack on Pearl Harbor (Wati, 2019, p. 8). The attack took place in the early hours of Sunday, December 7, 1941, when 185 bomber, torpedo, and fighter planes were launched from the flight decks of Japanese naval aircraft carriers anchored just 320 kilometers from the island of Hawaii (Unoki, 2016, p. 1). Five hours after the attack, President Roosevelt immediately declared war on Japan (Takou, 2014, p. 6).

As a result of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States suffered significant losses; two waves of attacks over the course of 90 minutes destroyed eight U.S. battleships, three light cruisers, and three destroyers, and approximately 188 aircraft were destroyed. The attack also claimed the lives of 3,435 U.S. military personnel (Unoki, 2016, p. 1). The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was also reported in several old newspapers, one of which was the Asia Raya newspaper. In that newspaper, the Pearl Harbor attack was referred to as the "Attack on Pearl Harbor." One article reported on the losses suffered by the United States, stating that the U.S. Navy in the Pacific had been crippled and that part of the Allied forces had been destroyed (Asia Raya, 1942, p. 1).

Japan's victory in the attack on Pearl Harbor, which resulted in heavy casualties, prompted Japan to expand its territorial reach into Southeast Asia. Japan's goal in seizing control of areas in

Southeast Asia was to establish strongholds and secure a steady supply of resources so it could continue to fend off attacks from the Allies (namely the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia) throughout the Greater East Asia War (Gunawan, 2022, p. 1). Japan had to take the strength of the Allied forces into account in order to gain control of Southeast Asia. This was because several countries in the Southeast Asian region were already under Allied occupation: the Dutch East Indies were under Dutch control, the Philippines were under U.S. occupation, Malaysia was under British control, and the countries in Indochina were under French occupation (Ishak, 2012, p. 4).

The next attack was launched by Japan against Singapore. The British defended their positions to the south toward the sea, while the Japanese took a bold step by launching a land attack through the forests of Thailand and Malaya from the north (Arifianto, 2025, p. 202). The war in the Malay Peninsula began on December 8, 1941, in Kotabaru. From that battlefield, Japanese troops advanced at a speed of about 40–80 km per day, and two days later, the large battleships “Repulse” and “Prince of Wales” were sunk (Asia Raya, 1942, p. 1). Japanese forces successfully landed in Singapore via the northwest coast on February 8, 1942. It was only then that the battle for Singapore truly began, lasting until February 15, 1942 (Arifianto, 2025, p. 202).

The start of the Greater East Asia War marked a victory for Japanese forces and a crushing defeat for the Allied forces. Japan capitalized on the situation effectively, enabling it to win the battles that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor. Japan succeeded in occupying Singapore, which facilitated its advance toward the Dutch East Indies to secure oil in Kalimantan, Java, and Sumatra. Japan moved as quickly as possible to seize strategic territories in the Dutch East Indies from the Dutch, beginning with the fall of Tarakan to Japanese forces on January 12, 1942 (Sinaga et al., 2024, p. 379). On February 3, 1942, Japanese forces carried out an air raid on Surabaya as the first step in Japan’s invasion of Java, prior to a large-scale amphibious landing in late February 1942.

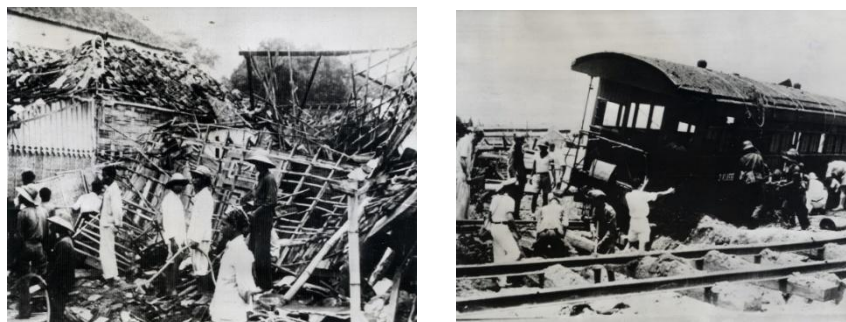


Figure 1 & 2. Documentation photo of damage caused by Japanese air raids in Surabaya on the date 3 February 1942

(Source: <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:840906> & <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:842211>)

The air raid carried out by Japanese forces in Surabaya aimed to destroy Dutch naval bases and military facilities, as well as to paralyze Allied communication and logistics networks. The attack also affected the indigenous population; several homes were destroyed and railroad tracks were damaged. The Dutch East Indies government had, in fact, officially declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941. This made the Dutch East Indies which were under Dutch rule at the time a target for Japanese attacks (Sinaga et al., 2024, p. 381). Subsequently, the Battle of the Java Sea began on February 27, 1942 (Arifianto, 2025, p. 206).

In the naval battles near Jakarta and Surabaya, Japanese forces achieved a resounding victory; on March 1, 1942, they successfully landed on the island of Java at three locations. By March 9, 1942, the entire island of Java had fallen into Japanese hands (Asia Raya, 1942, p. 5). On March 8, 1942, the Dutch East Indies were officially occupied by Japan, which swiftly dismantled Western dominance. The Japanese shared physical similarities with the indigenous population, which worked to their advantage in easily spreading the “Three A’s” slogan: 1) Japan, the Light of Asia; 2) Japan, the Leader of Asia; 3) Japan, the Protector of Asia. The Japanese used these slogans to win

over the indigenous population. Dutch resistance to the Japanese forces' attack ended with the signing of the Kalijati Agreement between the Netherlands and Japan on March 9, 1942 (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 190).

From 1942 to 1945, a number of major battles took place. After a series of Japanese victories at the start of the Greater East Asia War, Japan's position began to weaken following its defeat at the Battle of Midway (1942). The Allied counteroffensive in the Pacific gradually cut off Japan's supply lines and wore down its military, until the war ended in 1945. Japan finally surrendered after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945) (Adillah & Ribawati, 2024, p. 55).

Japan's Motives for Expanding into the Dutch East Indies

Initially, the concepts of *Nanshin-ron* and *Hokushin-ron* were promoted because the Japanese recognized the limitations of their natural resources, leading them to conclude that expansion to the north or south was necessary to serve the nation's interests (Sa'adati, 2018, p. 3). Initially, Japan was more inclined to implement the *Hokushin-ron* strategy, aiming to conquer the Chinese mainland through the Army. Over time, however, *Hokushin-ron* was deemed ineffective. Consequently, the *Nanshin-ron* strategy, championed by the Japanese Navy, gained dominance due to its success in increasing state revenue. The *Nanshin-ron* had been implemented since the Meiji era (1868–1912), through the Taisho era (1912–1926), and into the Showa military era (1926–1945) (Sa'adati, 2018, p. 4).

Since the early Meiji era (1868–1912), the Japanese Navy had been focusing on the southern region, which led to competition with the Japanese Army, which was strengthening its foothold for expansion on the Chinese mainland, including the Korean Peninsula (Goto, 1998, p. 5). The concept of *Nanshin-ron* had indeed been voiced since the Meiji era, but it was initially limited to economic and trade matters until it eventually evolved into a military strategy in the lead-up to World War II. During the Meiji era, the *Nanshin-ron* movement was initially focused solely on trade, as private capitalists sought to expand their economic reach overseas. During that era, many Japanese people migrated to other countries, where they went on to work as factory owners, miners, fishermen, general merchants, and even as geisha or *karayuki* (Sa'adati, 2018, p. 4).

At first, Japanese merchants only sold their goods door-to-door, offering textiles, medicines, and daily necessities. In the early 20th century, Japanese merchants began establishing permanent stores (Wardoyo, 2013, p. 39). Japanese stores were established not only in major cities but also in rural areas (Wardoyo, 2013, p. 4). Japanese stores reached their peak between 1920 and 1930, even though the global economy was in crisis at the time. In fact, from 1930 to 1940, Japanese stores became even more popular and displaced Chinese and European products. This was due to product prices that were affordable for the local population; service at Japanese stores was also considered better and more courteous; and the quality of the products sold was guaranteed (Wardoyo, 2013, p. 39). Japan's invasion of the world market with its cheap products was a consequence of the global economic crisis and the devaluation of Japan's currency. Japan offered low prices to monopolize the market ("Japan's Subversive Agitations In Ned.-Indie," 1942, p. 12).

A German government white paper noted that Japan had been preparing to invade other countries. Since World War I, Japan had been formulating plans to occupy the Dutch East Indies. Many Japanese immigrants settled in the Dutch East Indies under difficult conditions, raising suspicions that their arrival was part of a military reconnaissance strategy. In addition, many Japanese photographers traveled around villages, earning meager incomes. These photographers had fairly extensive access to remote parts of the archipelago and were connected to local authorities. Consequently, suspicions arose that the spread of these photographers was a means of mapping the region and its social networks. The presence of Japanese people as fishermen, merchants, and photographers in the Dutch East Indies was not merely a means of earning a living, but part of a larger strategy to prepare for an invasion of the South ("Japan's Subversive Agitations In Ned.-Indie," 1942, p. 12).

Japan had several strategies for taking control of the Dutch East Indies, one of which was to implement the *Nanshin-ron* (doctrine of southern expansion) prior to the military occupation. This strategy relied not only on military force but also on economic and social penetration, which had been underway since 1930. Japan also sought to use the economy as a tool of influence not just through the military, but also by infiltrating the market and fostering relationships with the local population to undermine Dutch dominance. This influx of Japanese imports was accompanied by the implementation of the *Nanshin-ron* doctrine; the entry of Japanese merchants into the Dutch East Indies made it easier to establish contact with the indigenous population, with the aim of inciting the natives to rebel against the Dutch government. Thus, should Japan eventually occupy the Dutch East Indies, it would be able to establish a distribution network reliant on Japanese trading houses ("Japan's Subversive Agitations In Ned.-Indie," 1942, p. 12). Japan hoped for assistance from the indigenous population in the event of a conquest of the Dutch East Indies. Japan employed various methods to win the sympathy of the indigenous population, one of which was providing support and credit to small indigenous merchants whose imports and distribution relied on Japanese trading houses ("Steunvelleening Aan Indonesische Handelaren," 1942, p. 5).

As one of the victorious nations following the end of World War I, Japan was required to participate in several international treaties established by the victorious nations to maintain peace. However, the treaties with the superpowers (the United States and the United Kingdom) made Japan feel subordinated within the international order. The Japanese Navy became increasingly eager to expand southward due to two treaties: the Washington Naval Treaty (February 6, 1922) and the London Naval Treaty (April 2, 1930) (Kusnadi & Sampurno, 2021, p. 25). The Japanese Navy was dissatisfied with these treaties; it sought to maintain a fleet of large cruisers and a total tonnage of auxiliary vessels equivalent to 70 percent of that of the United States, as well as a submarine fleet of 78,000 metric tons (Goto, 1998, p. 11). However, the outcome of the negotiations determined that Japan could only possess 64 percent of the U.S. levels (Kusnadi & Sampurno, 2021, p. 26).

The Japanese Navy's production was indeed highly advanced in terms of technology, but in some areas, Japan faced industrial constraints due to a lack of resources. Japan suffered from a shortage of raw materials and logistical inefficiencies (Arifianto, 2025, p. 17). The situation was further exacerbated by internal conflicts between the Japanese Navy and Army. The factor driving the Fleet Group's ambitions was not merely a protest against the Treaty of London, but rather the Navy's sense of being challenged by the Army, which was strengthening its power and interests in mainland China. The desire not to be left behind by the Army fueled the Navy's ambition to carry out its demands for expansion to the south (Goto, 1998, p. 13).

The plan for expansion to the south signaled that Southeast Asia was a vital region for Japan, particularly for securing natural resources such as oil and rubber; furthermore, Southeast Asia—specifically the Dutch East Indies—would become a strategic sea route for Japan. This expansion plan was discussed by the Southern Policy Research Committee in 1936; the findings of that study confirmed the importance of the southern region to Japan's interests, as follows (Goto, 1998, pp. 29-30):

1. Developing the tropical southern regions by combining Japanese capital and technology with Chinese and indigenous labor can address Japan's natural resource needs.
2. Expansion to the south will also help resolve the problem of overpopulation by relocating people to Australia and New Zealand.
3. Educating the still-primitive indigenous peoples to become strong consumers of Japanese-made goods.
4. The strength and prosperity of the Japanese Empire must surpass those of Britain and the United States by uniting the nations of East Asia under Japanese leadership.

Japan justified its expansion into the South as the implementation of the ideology of Pan-Asianism and the application of *Hakko I Chi-u*. The early implementation of Pan-Asianism can be seen in the "line of advantage" policy, which served as the basis for Japan's territorial expansion—beginning with Korea in 1910 and the conquest of China in 1895. This reached its peak in 1940 with the establishment of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Assri & Shadiq, 2026, pp. 214-215).

Meanwhile, Hakko Ichiu is an ideology derived from the Shinto religious teachings embraced by the Japanese people, meaning “the eight cardinal directions under Japan.” Hakko Ichiu became a political propaganda slogan during World War II with the aim of enabling Japan to dominate Greater East Asia (Nurohmat, 2021, p. 54). Both ideologies shared the same goal: to unify Asia under Japanese leadership. However, this goal served merely as a pretext to pave the way for Japan's path to glory and victory in the war. Initially, Japan sought only the unification of mainland China until it found itself in a corner. Japan's primary motive for expanding into the south was to exploit both natural and human resources to support its war against China and the Greater East Asia War (Assri & Shadiq, 2026, p. 215).

Although Japan was technologically advanced and modernized—and thus able to compete with Western nations—it was a country poor in natural resources. Consequently, Japan had to rely on resource supplies from other countries. This was what drove Japan to expand. After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, the southern region was finally viewed as an area with potential (Goto, 1998, p. 125). To survive the war, Japan desperately needed oil for its military and industry; the Japanese Navy required 400 metric tons of oil per hour to sustain its operations (Arifianto, 2025, p. 202). Therefore, Japan needed resource-rich Southeast Asia—particularly the Dutch East Indies—which was rich in oil, nickel, rubber, and tin. For Japan, the Dutch East Indies was a vast territory with abundant resources; it would have been a great pity if that region had not been developed (Goto, 1998, p. 32).

Japan's primary motive for expanding into the Dutch East Indies was, of course, the region's abundant oil and rubber reserves. At that time, Japan was in desperate need of war supplies, particularly petroleum. This is evidenced by the fact that Japan first attacked the oil-producing regions of Tarakan, Balikpapan, and Palembang (Dilla, 2024, p. 2). In addition, the island of Java, with its fertile soil, could also be utilized by Japan to supply food for its troops. Japan also exploited human resources as reinforcements on the battlefield, while simultaneously using them as a first line of defense against the threat posed by the Allies (Asrori, 2024, p. 40).

The Impact of the Japanese Occupation in the Dutch East Indies

The Japanese military occupation of the Dutch East Indies lasted for 3.5 years. Japan portrayed itself as the “Light of Asia” and the savior of Asian nations from Western colonialism, using its “*hakko ichiu*” ideology to expand its influence across East Asia and Southeast Asia. In reality, however, Japan practiced colonialism in the same manner as Western powers. Western colonialism was carried out against weaker nations by monopolizing the politics, economy, and socio-cultural aspects of those regions with the aim of exploiting natural resources and human resources to support the interests of the colonial powers (Asrori, 2024, p. 33).

Japan succeeded in fully occupying the Dutch East Indies on March 8, 1942; the Commander-in-Chief of the Dutch East Indies Armed Forces, acting on behalf of the Allied Forces in the Dutch East Indies, surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese Army under Lieutenant General Hitoshi Imamura (Dilla, 2024, p. 2). The Dutch East Indies had been under Dutch colonial rule for three centuries, until Japan finally took over and brought about radical changes in the social, political, and economic structures (Ronauli, et al., 2025, p. 267). The system of government during the Japanese occupation was controlled by two branches: the Army and the Navy. Each had its own territory, namely: (1) Java and Madura, with Batavia as the center, were under the control of the Japanese Army; and Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, with Singapore as the center; (2) the Japanese Navy controlled Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, the Moluccas, and Irian; (3) All military regions were under the command of the Supreme Commander for Southeast Asia, who was initially based in Saigon and reported to Tokyo (Wulandari, et al., 2024, p. 6).

The following are the effects of the Japanese military occupation on the Indonesian people:

Political Impact

Shortly after Japan succeeded in taking control of the Dutch East Indies, several policies were implemented to regulate society. Japan dissolved the Dutch colonial government structure,

replacing it with a Japanese military government so that the center of power was in Japanese hands (Rut, et al., 2024, p. 7). Japan established two priority government policies: eliminating Western influence and mobilizing the indigenous population to support Japan in the war (Sinaga, et al., 2024, p. 381). These priority policies were implemented based on three principles: seeking popular support, utilizing existing governmental structures, and implementing a system of autarky. The implementation of Japanese policies had consequences that caused hardship for the indigenous population, both physically and materially, as Japan exploited indigenous labor and abundant natural resources solely for the sake of the war effort (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 191).

Japan enacted a policy banning the use of Dutch and English, and instead introduced the Japanese language. Not only that, but Japan also replaced the official calendar with the Japanese calendar (Sinaga, et al., 2024, p. 381). The adoption of the Japanese calendar can be seen in newspapers published at that time, such as the *Asia Raya* newspaper, which used the Japanese year system. The use of the Japanese language was consistently promoted in every issue of *Asia Raya*. For example, an advertisement for a Japanese dictionary was published in *Asia Raya* (Asia Raya, 1942, p. 4). Additionally, *Asia Raya* published daily articles on Japanese language lessons (Asia Raya, 1942, p. 3). This newspaper served as a propaganda tool for Japan to win the sympathy of the people. This policy, known as “Language Planning,” aimed to strengthen the influence of the Japanese government and reduce Western influence in the Dutch East Indies (Sinaga, et al., 2024, p. 381). The impact of this policy was to foster and strengthen national identity, as it encouraged the people to adopt their own national language, namely Indonesian (Rut, et al., 2024, p. 7).

The Japanese military government was dictatorial; all political movements were banned for the indigenous population (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 200). However, Japan permitted the formation of organizations under strict supervision, which ultimately served to fuel the spirit of nationalism among the Indonesian people. For example, the establishment of *Putera* (*Pusat Tenaga Rakyat*)—an organization initially founded to serve Japanese interests—was, over time, utilized by movement leaders to strengthen national consciousness (Rut, et al., 2024, p. 7).

Economic Impact

The Japanese military occupation of Indonesia had a devastating impact on the indigenous population. Although the occupation lasted only three and a half years, its various policies caused immense suffering for the Indonesian people. Japan exploited not only natural resources but also human resources for the sake of the Greater East Asia War. Japan’s goal was to gather raw materials for the war, and to achieve this, it implemented a two-stage plan consisting of conquest and restructuring (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 201).

The first phase was the takeover: all Dutch-owned sugar mills were seized by Japan and managed by Japanese private entities. The second phase was the restructuring phase. Japan implemented new policies, including the autarky system and the *tonarigumi* system; Japan monopolized plantation produce as regulated by Law No. 22 of 1942 issued by the *Gunseikan*; and mobilized labor to support wartime needs (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 201). Japan had anticipated that the Greater East Asia War would be protracted, so controlling the Dutch East Indies would greatly help alleviate Japan’s burden. Aware of this, the Dutch East Indies carried out scorched-earth tactics, with the population destroying vital infrastructure—mostly production facilities. This led to economic paralysis, transforming what had initially been a normal economy into a war economy (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2019, p. 76).

Japan’s economic policy focused on the confiscation of economic assets deemed essential. As a result, the people’s economic conditions deteriorated further, with rising poverty and declining food production, leading to famine in many areas. In addition, Japan printed money without any backing, leading to severe inflation that caused prices to rise drastically (Sinaga, et al., 2024, p. 382). Japan exploited not only natural resources but also human resources. Indigenous people were forced into labor and sent to work on infrastructure projects. These inhumane working conditions led to a rise in mortality rates, which subsequently became a major tragedy of the Japanese occupation (Rut, et al., 2024, p. 8).

Social Impact

The social impact of the Japanese occupation was felt not only at the community level but also within family structures. As a result of the romusha policy, many families lost their heads of household, who were forced to leave home for forced labor. Ultimately, women had to take on the responsibility of managing the household and also serving as breadwinners. The impact of these changes was the need to rebuild family stability after the Japanese occupation; the patterns of social interaction resulting from this had long-term effects (Kiswanto, et al., 2024, p. 3).

Initially, Japan established the *Kinrohosi* (community service) program, which eventually evolved into forced labor for the war effort. As time went on, Japan needed more laborers to build infrastructure to support the war effort, such as fortifications, airfields, highways, and bunkers. Consequently, Japan forcibly conscripted people from villages in Java. Initially, people performed this work voluntarily, but as Japan became increasingly cornered in the Greater East Asia War, the mobilization of labor was entrusted to the Romukyokai. Many Romusha workers never returned from their assignments because they died. The workers were given extremely arduous tasks but were not provided with nutritious food or adequate healthcare (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 201).

As a result of these dire social conditions, a spirit of nationalism grew among the Peta fighters, leading them to attempt an uprising (Fadli & Kumalasari, 2019, p. 202). The Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies not only resulted in the exploitation of natural resources and people through the romusha labor system but also the exploitation of indigenous girls. This was driven by Japanese culture, which viewed women as having a role in war, and by the laws of war that permitted the exploitation of resources in occupied territories—including women. The Japanese military implemented the “*Jugun Ianfu*” system. These exploitative practices inflicted social wounds that are not easily healed. Women who endured these traumatic experiences had to bear the stigma, shame, and physical and psychological suffering that affected subsequent generations (Kiswanto, et al., 2024, p. 9). These traumatic experiences also fostered a new awareness among women regarding the importance of protecting their human rights. The suffering endured by the Indonesian people ignited a spirit of resistance. Fighters who witnessed the suffering of the romusha and jugun ianfu were moved to launch a rebellion against Japanese atrocities (Sinaga, et al., 2024, p. 385).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that Japan's expansion into the Dutch East Indies was part of Japan's broader strategy to support the Greater East Asia War. The *Hakko Ichiu* ideology served as political justification; Japan aspired to build a Greater East Asia under the leadership of the Japanese Empire. However, it is evident that this expansion was driven by economic necessity resulting from the American embargo and military needs following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The primary motives for the expansion were the control of natural resources and strategic military interests in confronting the Allies. Furthermore, the Japanese occupation had a significant impact by eliminating Western influence and mobilizing the people for the war effort, which in turn sparked a spirit of nationalism. In addition, the military occupation, which implemented a war economy, contributed to rising poverty and an increase in deaths from starvation. The exploitation of natural and human resources also caused deep psychological trauma.

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