

Portuguese Timor

By [Célia Reis](#)

Summary

The Portuguese territory of Timor was affected by the war mainly because of its proximity to the Dutch colony, the Dutch East Indies. Furthermore, without lines of transportation and communication, Timor became more isolated and imports and exports decreased. In spite of Portuguese participation in the First World War, other countries maintained interest in this colony.

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Timor before the “European War”

Timor, the Portuguese colony farthest from [Portugal](#), existed in a state of internal wars in the decades before the Great War; the complete pacification of the territory was only completed in 1912.

Timor was familiar with the danger of a European war especially because of its connection with [the Netherlands](#). This country dominated half of the island and did not have problem-free relations with the Portuguese power, at times even encouraging and helping the indigenous population to revolt against Portugal. The border between the two colonies was not completely clear, and in June 1914, an arbitrary decision set the border. However, it was necessary to work together to demarcate the border. In this context, in December 1914 Governor [Filomeno da Câmara Melo Cabral \(1873-1934\)](#) wrote to Lisbon suggesting another solution: negotiations with the Dutch, taking advantage of Portuguese relations with [Great Britain](#), in order to occupy of the whole island.

Portuguese Timor and the Netherlands’ Position

However, this did not happen. The main problem for Portugal during the conflict was the Netherlands’ position, [neutral](#) but pro-German: if the country were to join the Central Powers, Portuguese Timor would be affected. In this situation, a German ship arrived in 1914, but

retired after local intimidation. In 1915, Britain believed that [Germany](#) was using the coast to ship [weapons](#).

The danger of an invasion remained during the following years and the governor asked [Macau](#) to send the gunboat *Patria*. However, Macau needed it for its own security. Another problem was the interruption of [telegraph communication](#) with Europe because the Portuguese did not have their own lines.

In 1917, Britain delivered an ultimatum to the Netherlands and this act necessitated a more effective defence, especially because, as the governor wrote, it would be impossible to learn of any rupture between the two countries in a timely manner. Thus, the Portuguese authority moved its troops, concentrating them near the border, and decided to implement more intensive surveillance. Despite the request for weapons, the [government in Lisbon](#) did not have the means to send them to Timor.

In general, the war impacted the local economy, especially since reduced [transportation](#) complicated imports and exports. On the other hand, *pataca* became the only legal coin in the colony.

After the War

After the war, the questions related to this Portuguese possession remained. At the [Paris Peace Conference](#) there were rumours about Japanese interest; later, [Australia](#) sought to invade Timor.

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