CHAPTER I

The colonial race

I have drawn a coloured map of the various colonies which surround our Indian Archipelago, and when one sees those colours, one has to immediately admit that a draughtsman with his wits about him would easily be able to draft a striking picture of the risk we run. To the left, to the west, one descies the form of a snake, these are the English colonies, which lour threateningly from Singapore to Sumatra. On the other side is a gaping maw, the shape of Australia, which applies the Monroe Doctrine to New Guinea, in the vicinity like a hungry wolf Germany also lies in wait for us, and Japan, of which in former days nobody took any notice, turns out to have become a Big Power which can pose a real threat, while the greedy Yankee, who sticks at nothing, has already appeared in our near vicinity.\footnote{Handelingen Tweede Kamer 1904-05:207.}

It was a frightening world that the socialist H.H. van Kol unfolded in Dutch Parliament in November 1904. The message was clear: other powers were encroaching on the Netherlands Indies, and might not stop at its borders.

What was happening had started a number of decades earlier. Since the 1880s anxious Dutchmen had witnessed how mightier nations were carving up the world among themselves, and in doing so establishing themselves in regions which were uncomfortably close to the Netherlands Indies. The political and economic rivalries between the major European states had spread to parts of the world which up to that moment had been left untouched. At first this was mainly a competition between Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia, though other states such as the United States and Italy then and before also figured in the scenarios constructed by Dutchmen about nations which wanted to establish settlements in the Dutch sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. By the end of the 1890s the two contemporary non-European Powers, the United States of America and Japan, had joined in.

Colonies, protectorates, and spheres of influence represented the status symbol of a modern self-assured nation. Colonial expansion was considered synonymous with the winning of overseas markets and economic growth. Even in Austria-Hungary people were caught up in the fever to occupy what
in the European vocabulary of those days was termed ‘empty’ land: regions inhabited by what were called uncivilized or semi-civilized peoples, governed by their own chiefs and rulers. There was not only the ‘scramble for Africa’, but also a ‘grab’ for the Pacific and East Asia, and to a certain extent also for parts of the moribund Ottoman Empire. In some instances European governments had taken the initiative, fearful of the intentions of their competitors on the international scene. In other cases the lead had been taken by enterprising adventurers, overseas settlers, or commercial firms, turning to the motherland to protect their newly acquired wealth and concessions or to block the advance of others.

The 1870s had already brought home to the Dutch how helpless the Netherlands was when other nations were intent on territorial expansion, whether this concerned the Netherlands Indies or Holland in Europe itself. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 had led to the first major scare in decades, in Holland and in the Netherlands Indies. An occupation of Holland might very well invite other powers to snatch at the Dutch colonial possessions, as had been the case in the days of Napoleon when British rule had replaced that of the Dutch. A few years later the ‘Borneo Affair’, the acquisition by British merchants of Sabah, sent an even clearer message to the Dutch that the Netherlands was in a very weak position if it were to become embroiled in a conflict over the boundaries of its colonial territory or sphere of influence with stronger adversaries.

Next came the occupation of the eastern part of New Guinea, the object of a mini colonial race between Germany and Great Britain. Initially the new German Empire had no colonial aspirations. The 1860s and 1870s had seen various German citizens who had pleaded for overseas possessions, including regions in the East Indies Archipelago which were not under Dutch control, but their protestations were ignored. Formosa and Indochina had been mentioned as were – in a series of article in the Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung in February 1867 – Timor and the Philippines. The Fiji Islands, Samoa and, what did upset the Dutch, Sumatra and New Guinea also did not escape the eye of the champions of a German colonial venture. Such dreams of overseas German settlements were not yet shared by the governments of Prussia and the German Empire. Invariably Prince Otto von Bismarck turned down the plethora of petitions from German businessmen and consuls abroad asking for a German annexation of spots in the Pacific and elsewhere. Had he acceded to such suggestions Germany would have become the master of parts of Fiji and Samoa, taken possession of Hokkaido in Japan, driven the defeated French out of Indochina, and acquired a foothold in China. Germany would also have established itself in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Philippines, and would have administered colonies in Africa and Latin America.²

² For the early German plans, see, for instance, Gründer 1999:54-63.