

The Spectacular History of the Dutch Invasions of Northeastern Brazil

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Brazil and its battles. It is one of the countries that lay under the rule of several empires during the modern era, until it became, in physical terms, one of the vastest territories on the planet — the one we hold with pride. The battles I write about today are the Dutch invasions, which took place while we were ruled by the Spanish-Portuguese monarchy.

In 1580 came the political union of Portugal and Spain, known as the Iberian Union, whose most prosperous colony was the State of Brazil, inherited from an independent Portugal. This did not go unnoticed by the Dutch. In search of new commercial opportunities — above all the tempting seizure of the sugar mills of the Northeast, which would also open the way for the spread of the Protestant doctrine inherited from Luther — they stormed Salvador in 1624, a city that was already the capital of the State of Brazil (a colonial entity separate from the State of Maranhão since 1621, as discussed in another article published by the Brazilian Academy, "From 1500 to 1828: The History of Brazil's Territorial Evolution").

The initial capture of Salvador was relatively easy. The Dutch celebrated their triumph for days and nights on end, encouraged to plan further moves in the belief that the Iberian Union would not react. When the news reached the Iberian Peninsula, the Spanish-Portuguese monarchy did not keep them waiting. As in a game of chess, it quickly set out its pieces, dispatching troops in haste but in good order, to repair the infamy and recover control of that capital. Portuguese and Spaniards, after centuries of rivalry, now found themselves under the same crown, and together they would fight for São Salvador da Bahia de Todos os Santos.

But the price would be high. In the seventeenth century, organizing military expeditions in haste to the far side of the vast Atlantic almost always meant dealing with diseases such as scurvy, appalling sanitary conditions, minimal space for the fighting sailors, and — with all of that combined — the possibility of mutiny. Everything one can imagine happened, except surrender. Despite the hardships of the crossing, the Spanish-Portuguese forces reached Salvador and began the battle of reconquest.

If we may say that the Dutch conquest of Salvador was not especially painful, neither would the Dutch withstand the power of the Spanish-Portuguese fleets. The city was sealed off by the Iberians, and the siege lasted no more than a few weeks. In the end: dozens of Dutch prisoners of war, and one of the most spectacular military victories of the modern era for the Iberian Union — which dissolved in 1640 on account of the Portuguese Restoration War, by which time a second Flemish invasion had already begun in the State of Brazil, with the same aim of expropriating sugar mills, this time north of Salvador (Pernambuco, Paraíba, and Rio Grande do Norte), and with one of its most telling symbols in the renaming of several cities — today's João Pessoa became "Frederikstadt".

In that second period there was great progress in the occupied territories, particularly under the Dutch governor Johan Maurits of Nassau (known as the governor of Dutch Brazil, whose mandate came from his position as an officer of the Dutch West India Company — an enterprise that, like other European ventures, took upon itself the military role that in principle belonged to the home countries). Freedom of

religion came into force, and with it, of course, the Protestant doctrine practiced by the invaders. Art flourished, as did the economy, which had already made the united State of Brazil the most attractive of Portugal's colonies.

But nothing erased the fact that this was an invasion, and Portugal, alone in its mission to expel the Dutch once more, only accomplished it in 1654. This proves two facts, however contradictory: during the Iberian Union the Portuguese were indeed part of a stronger army, yet the new expulsion of the Flemish showed that not even separation from Spain had stripped them of their warlike and conquering spirit.

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