

The Red Bridge: A bridge to national liberation

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Abstract

Central to the narrative of the Indonesian struggle for independence, was the battle waged by the untrained contingents of highly motivated Indonesian nationalists against well-armed British and Indian troops in the Javanese city of Surabaya. The flash point for this deadly battle that eventually destroyed large parts of the city, was the death of the commander of British forces that occurred on the approaches of the Red Bridge – Jembatan Merah. Eventually, to cost more than 20,000 Indonesian and 600 British and British Indian lives, it was a battle that left a city in ruins, its inhabitants displaced, but a citizenry inspired to fight on. In time, the bridge, still today recognisable by its bright red paint, became the symbol of an iconic battle that effectively launched the subsequent four year struggle to gain independence against Dutch colonialism. Now the site of re-enactments, the day on which this battle was ignited is known as Indonesia's National Hero's Day.

The Red Bridge today, lives on in multiple embodiments: as a mundane piece of urban architecture, a literary image in popular narrative, and a stage for theatrical re-enactment. It gains its significance from what is not physically present: from the meanings that have come to be attached to it, from the significance of the battles that followed an incident located in its proximity, and from the pretence of re-enactment. In these senses, the humble Red Bridge becomes the bridge from colonialism to postcolonialism, from the present to the past, and from the past to the present.