

**War**  
December 11-12, 1941  
Battle of Singapore  
**and**  
**Memory**  
January 5-6, 1942  
Battle of Trolak-Slim  
**in**  
**Malaysia**  
December 10, 1941  
Sinking of HMS Repulse & HMS Prince of Wales  
**and**  
January 15-16, 1942  
Battle of Muar  
**Singapore**

edited by

**P. Lim Pui Huen**  
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# War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore

## An Introduction

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*Diana Wong*

### I

In 1982, a ten-foot-high granite obelisk inscribed with Japanese characters was unearthed at the popular Lido Beach, Johor Bahru. It turned out to have been the site from which the Japanese 25th Army, led by General Yamashita, had launched its final assault in its Malaya campaign some forty years ago. The target was the island across the straits, Singapore, the much-vaunted “impregnable fortress” of the British empire in the Far East. Within two weeks, Singapore fell. In commemoration of those who had given their lives in the battle for Singapore, the granite obelisk had been erected on the site where the attack had been launched. Three and a half years later, British troops returned to accept the Japanese surrender. This proud memorial, cast in stone, to lives lost in a glorious victory, eventually slid into the soft muddy ground of the beach, buried under its own weight, and forgotten (Lim, this volume).

History is written by victors. This old dictum, confirmed yet again in the fate of the mute memorial described above, suggests that history also silences what may otherwise have been remembered. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) organized a workshop on War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore in October 1995, from which the chapters in this volume are derived (with the exception of two solicited papers).<sup>1</sup> The lead questions were: why the relative absence of public commemoration of the war in this region (Wang, this volume), what private and popular memories have remained (see, in particular, Abu Talib, Naimah Talib and Lim in this volume) — how, in other words, has the politics of memory been staged with respect to the Japanese Occupation of British Malaya?

The verdict of the historian would appear to be uncontested in at least one point: that the war, as Wang Gungwu observes in his paper, was “a war between empires”. The Japanese, in their attempt to dislodge the Western imperial powers from Southeast Asia, were themselves “the last imperialists in Asia” and, after their brilliant conquest of Malaya, had “clearly intended to stay” (Wang, this volume). And yet, with the dredging of memory not otherwise clearly articulated in history books and war memorials, “the” war reveals itself as many, and as different, wars, its meaning refracted through varying subject positions and different temporalities. Several papers in this volume bear testimony to this plurality of meaning and memory with respect to the war.

For the Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, the events which began with the landing of Japanese troops at Kota Bahru in northern Malaya on 8 December 1941 marked not the beginning, but the *continuation* of a chain of events which had begun in China with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1936. The paper by Yeo Song Nian and Ng Siew Ai in this volume, which traces the accounts of war and occupation in Chinese literary works written after the war, brings this clearly into focus. In his paper, Wang, whose parents were Chinese intellectuals born in China and working in the “Nanyang” when the war broke out, writes movingly of how they “chose to submerge their Malayan memories to embrace the larger Chinese collective memory of the Sino-Japanese War”.

If the “war between imperialists” was seen as a national (Chinese) war of liberation by the Chinese in Malaya, other, and quite different, scripts of national liberation were being crafted as well. P. Ramasamy’s paper in this volume draws attention to the memory of the Indian National Army (INA), formed in Singapore on 17 February 1942 and inspired by the charismatic Subhas Chandra Bose, whose rallying cry “Challo Delhi” (on to Delhi) electrified the Indian community in Malaya and moved them to contribute gold, property and lives to the cause of liberation of the Indian motherland from the yoke of British colonial rule. “We had sold our lives to his dream and considered it a privilege”, remembers a former INA captain quoted by Ramasamy in his paper.

Patricia Lim (this volume) was told by one of her informants; “The Japanese fought our war for us. If they had not done so, we would have had to fight the British ourselves”. Abu Talib Ahmad’s paper (this volume) plumbs the depths of Malay memory of the war and it becomes evident that General Yamashita’s appeal, the day after Singapore’s conquest, to “the Malayan people to understand the real intention of Nippon and to co-operate with the Nippon Army towards the prompt establishment of the New Order and the Co-Prosperity Sphere” (quoted in Wong, forthcoming) had not failed to resonate. Abu Talib prefaces his paper with a quote from a villager from Yan, a village