

Martyrs, Traitors, and the Eelam-Tamil Nation

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The deaths of these heroes have become the power that move our history forward, the life-breath of our struggle ... These great heroes do not die in time; they are artisans of independence, heroic maravars who have sown the seeds for the rise of a great liberation in our soil.

— V. Prabhakaran, Leader, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam¹

159

HONORING MARTYRDOM

Sivagnanam Shritharan made his first public appearance after being elected leader of the largest Tamil political party in Sri Lanka, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), in January 2024. This appearance constituted a visit to the Kanakapuram cemetery in Kilinochchi, one of the many war cemeteries of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that were dismantled by the Sri Lankan Army after the end of the Civil War in May 2009.² During his visit, Shritharan commemorated the LTTE's fallen soldiers, the martyrs of the Tamil military organization that, for 30 long and bloody years, fought for independence from the Sri Lankan state. When facing defeat in May 2009, the LTTE refused to lay down its guns, sacrificing both its own cadres and tens of thousands of civilians in a final apocalypse of war. Two days after his election, Shritharan stated in an interview with the *Tamil Guardian* newspaper that his main objective as

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party leader will be to fulfill the Tamil people's national aspirations. In order to accomplish that, he plans to "rebuild the mobilisation of the Tamil nationalist forces as they were before 2009," a process which, in his opinion, "must start from the tombs of the heroes who were martyred ... must begin from the graves of the late Eelam national liberation fighters."³

MILITANCY AND REPRESENTATIVE POLITICS

Shritharan has been a Member of Parliament for the Jaffna District since 2010. ITAK, the party he now leads, held a historic role in cultivating Tamil militancy and its accompanying dedication to martyrdom, in response to the Sinhalese ethnic majoritarianism that unfolded in Sri Lanka after its independence in 1948. Since the end of the Civil War in 2009, ITAK has struggled to chart a way forward for a population marginalized by ethnic chauvinism and ravished by war and internal conflicts.⁴

The passing of the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 prompted the establishment of ITAK in the first year of Ceylon's (later Sri Lanka's) independence. The law made more than 700,000 Tamils of Indian origin stateless overnight, most of whom had lived in the country since their ancestors were taken from India by the British to work on the tea plantations generations ago. When the leader of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, the main Tamil party at the time of independence, accepted a ministerial post in the government that had tabled the bill in Parliament, a group of Tamil MPs broke from the party and established ITAK. The Citizenship Act was the first in a series of laws and regulations that, by excluding minority groups, progressively defined social citizenship and civil rights in Ceylon as a prerogative of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. Eight years later came the Official Language Act of 1956, or the "Sinhala Only Act," which replaced English with Sinhala as the language used for administrative purposes. This act required all public servants, many of whom were Tamil-speaking, to pass proficiency tests in Sinhala or lose their employment. The new republican constitution enacted in 1972, which changed the name of the state from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, enshrined Sinhalese as the sole official language in the Constitution and privileged Buddhism above the country's other religions.⁵

Alongside legal developments, confrontations between communities became violent. The first large-scale anti-Tamil riots broke out when Tamil politicians protested peacefully against the Official Language Act in June 1956.⁶ Only two years later, violence erupted again, this time spreading throughout the country and leading to the deaths of somewhere between 300 and 1,500

Tamil citizens.⁷ The historical role of ITAK was to radicalize Tamil politics and to mobilize militant resistance against government-sponsored ethnic chauvinism. In demonstrations against the new constitution, *hartals* (general strikes) were organized, schools boycotted, buses torched, government buildings stoned, the Sri Lankan flag burnt, and black flags flown in protest. In 1976, the political alliance named the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), with ITAK as its lead member, adopted the Vaddukoddai Resolution, which called for the establishment of an independent Tamil state under the name of Tamil Eelam. Rooted in the premise that the Tamils of the Northern and the Eastern Provinces of Ceylon constituted a nation of their own, having been independent until 1619, the resolution ended with a message to fight for freedom:

And this Convention calls upon the Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully into the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of TAMIL EELAM is reached.⁸

The Vaddukoddai Resolution has since often been cited both by the LTTE and other militants as a mandate for armed struggle. While ITAK's official position at the time was that the fight should be peacefully waged, its leading figures often condoned the violence committed by militant activists. The Tamil journalist D.B.S. Jeyaraj reported his memory of covering the TULF's convention in Colombo after their sweeping victory throughout the Tamil areas in the 1977 election, with leader Appapillai Amirthalingam calling out from the rostrum:

I stand on this stage without fear and state that Tamil Eelam will be born only through violent struggle and bloodshed. We are ready for the *Irathakalari* [bloody struggle].⁹

The final transition from representative politics to militarism in the Tamil constituency was brought about by the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, a watershed event in Sri Lankan history. For seven days, well-organized Sinhalese mobs, some of them connected to the ruling party's labor union, systematically killed, raped, and burned their way through the Tamil parts of Colombo, equipped with voter registration lists and leaving behind an estimated 3,000 dead, as well as displacing tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.¹⁰ To stifle open debate about its own inaction and possible complicity, the government hurriedly passed a Sixth Amendment to the Constitution in August of the same year. This required all Members of Parliament to disavow separatism, which led all TULF-members to resign their posts. From then on, representative democracy became of secondary importance in the Tamil areas. The Tamil militant groups, on the other hand, saw new recruits flocking to them, many of them displaced by the violence

in Colombo. The TULF, with ITAK as its main constituent, re-appeared on the political scene in 2001 as part of a reformed alliance under the name the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). This alliance recognized the LTTE as the sole legitimate representative of the Tamil nation in any future negotiations for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, which earned the members of the TNA the derisive nickname, “Tiger Nominated Agents” among their critics.¹¹ From being the main political force in Sri Lankan-Tamil politics in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, ITAK had now deferred to the power of the gun.

LTTE: LOYALTY AND SACRIFICE

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been universally recognized by security experts as an innovative and effective military organization, “one of the most sophisticated non-state armed groups ever assembled,” and “one of the most ... deadly terrorist insurgencies in the world.”¹² Its dedication to martyrdom was essential to the organization’s capacity. The LTTE fought the armed forces of the Sri Lankan state for three decades and established territorial control over large swaths of the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka from 1990 until 2009. The LTTE’s precursor, the Tamil New Tigers, was founded in 1972 by Vellupillai Prabhakaran, who was only 18 years old at the time. In 1976, this organization was renamed the LTTE. By then, Prabhakaran had already cut his teeth on political murder by killing the Tamil mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraipappah, in July 1975.¹³ The LTTE was one of almost 40 militant groups established in the Jaffna peninsula in the 1970s and early 1980s in response to ethnic marginalization and high-handed policing in the Tamil-speaking north.¹⁴ However, in April 1986, the LTTE decided to establish itself as the sole representative of the Tamil nation, subsequently coordinating assaults on its rivals throughout Sri Lanka’s north-east region. Hundreds were killed and thousands expelled from the Tamil areas. Among the militant groups active at the time, the public saw the LTTE militants as the most legitimate users of violence because of their discipline and self-sacrifice. The organization, therefore, faced little organized opposition from Tamil society.¹⁵ The LTTE’s legitimacy was established through Prabhakaran’s enforcement of an ascetic lifestyle for their soldiers as well as through organized propaganda emphasizing their dedication. By the late 1980s, the LTTE had published at least six periodicals in Tamil and English featuring Prabhakaran with his men in uniform, reinforcing the role of the LTTE as a “national” protective military force.¹⁶

The LTTE was, first and foremost, a military organization with a clear

hierarchical structure and an undisputed leader at the helm. Every morning, soldiers swore the same oath of loyalty to the cause and to Prabhakaran, who was hailed as *Surya Thevan* (Sun God) in the 2000s by supporters who had come of age during the war.¹⁷ Among the reasons the LTTE was able to out-manuever Tamil competitors and withstand the government's superior military power for so long were two feats of social engineering: first, clever and systematic ideological work, and second, the involvement of and control over the Tamil diaspora. In both enterprises, the concept of martyrdom played a decisive role.

Ideologically, the LTTE demonstrated extraordinary skill in embedding its military struggle in semantic categories, ceremonies, and physical indexes—an “aesthetic”—that resonated with previously known Tamil cultural concepts. Through this adaptation, the organization projected an ideology centered around self-sacrifice and martyrdom as manifested in the dead soldier, the *maveerar* (Great Hero).¹⁸ Crucially, the title of *maveerar* was only offered posthumously to those who had achieved *veeramaranam* (heroic death). While *cutantiram* (national liberation)

was the “holy aim” of the armed struggle, it was through the sacrifice of their soldiers and the veneration of their sacrifice by the national community that the struggle for freedom was opera-

tionalized.¹⁹ Notably, the LTTE's understanding of martyrdom is, even when they use the English term, not the same as that found in the Christian tradition. Rather, it draws from the Indian epic Mahabharata, where the hero Arjuna, a soldier in the Kurukshetra War, kills even his own kin because it is his duty and destiny to fight for righteousness.²⁰ The LTTE martyr does not accept death passively. They are a *tiyaki*: someone who abandons life in the act of killing, who, like Arjuna, realizes their potential by sacrificing themselves to achieve *dharma* (moral and righteous life path). As a visible sign of the soldiers' will to sacrifice, a *kippu* (cyanide capsule) was worn by all LTTE fighters around their necks, to be bitten if captured.²¹ The vial was deliberately exposed, hanging on a cord around their necks in processions and in daily encounters between LTTE cadres and civilians.²²

To the LTTE, the ideal martyr was represented by the *karumpuli*, the

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“Black Tigers,” an elite unit attached to the special operations department of the organization’s intelligence wing whose members volunteered for suicide missions. The Black Tigers were sometimes deployed as frontline soldiers in ordinary battles but were also used for attacks against non-military targets. It is assumed that the LTTE had carried out more than 200 suicide bombings by 2004. This number includes the assassinations of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993, as well as a long list of politicians, journalists, and human rights activists, both Sinhalese and Tamil.²³ The Black Tigers are venerated annually on 5 July by supporters of the LTTE—the date marking the death of the organization’s first voluntary suicide soldier, Captain Miller, who drove a truck with explosives into the Nellyadi army garrison in Jaffna in 1987, killing 40 soldiers.²⁴

The LTTE’s concept of martyrdom that draws on notions of personhood

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and sacrifice in the Hindu tradition is only one example of the organization’s revival of ideas that were half-forgotten by the public. Much of this revivalism was inspired by Prabhakaran’s

admiration for Subhas Chandra Bose, who, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, similarly drew on pre-colonial concepts to motivate the Indian National Army’s fight for independence from the British. The South-Indian Maravar caste, which was an important part of the Indian National Army’s armed cadre, was declared a criminal caste by the British government in The Criminal Tribes Act of 1911. Bose, however, regarded the Maravars as embodying authentic pre-colonial martial values—an understanding Prabhakaran transposed onto his own Karayar caste.²⁵ Further, he adopted and adapted what is known as “the trinity of Subhasism,” its tenets being *faith* (in the leader), *unity* (of the nation), and *sacrifice* (of life), as a doctrine of moral and discipline.²⁶ Central to the spread of the LTTE’s ideological work was the organization’s propaganda office, the “Office of the Great Heroes of Tamil Eelam” (*tamileelamaveerar panimanai*), which was established in the early 1990s. The office’s main responsibilities were issues relating to the martial ideology of the LTTE—distributed through slogans, posters, flags, monuments, and the media—and to the commemoration of the

organization's war heroes.

In 1989, Vellupillai Prabhakaran declared 27 November as the official day of salutation for the fallen heroes of the organization, that is, all cadres killed in service, under the name of *Maveerar Nal* (Great Heroes' Day). The date was selected to commemorate the death of Lieutenant Shankar, a close friend of Prabhakaran and the first member of the organization to die in an armed encounter in the fight for Eelam. At the time of Shankar's death, the LTTE had no more than 30 active members. Seven years later, Prabhakaran assembled his then 600 cadres in the jungles of Mullaitivu to pay homage to the 1,307 fighters of his organization who had died in the preceding years. Over time, this day of commemoration evolved into a national day for Tamil Eelam with parallel ceremonies in all parts of the world where diasporic Eelam-Tamils live. In the territory under LTTE control, the war cemeteries where fighters of the organization had been buried were important ceremonial arenas. In exile, a war cemetery model with a few graves is often built out of papier-mâché on the ceremonial premises. At the center of the ceremony are the maveerar—fighters who died in battle. The commemoration is organized around the same core rituals: saluting the memory of the Great Heroes in silence, lighting the flame of *tiyakam* (abandonment of life), the hoisting of the LTTE tiger flag by the mother of a Great Hero, saluting garlanded pictures of the Great Heroes with lights, and recital of the Tiger motto: *pulikalin takam tamililat tayakam* (the thirst of the Tigers is the motherland Tamil Eelam).²⁷ Until the end of the Civil War in 2009, the annual speech, held by Prabhakaran on 27 November at 6:05 pm (Shankar's time of death), was transmitted via satellite connection to other parts of the world.

In addition, around the same time as Maveerar Nal's institution, the LTTE started burying their dead fighters instead of cremating them like in Hindu tradition. The organization now established war cemeteries—*tuillum illam* (sleeping houses)—where the Great Heroes were given *natukal* (planted stones or gravestones) with their *nom de guerre* (war name) inscribed. These cemeteries were impressive monumental grounds kept in meticulous order by a special Maveerar department and differed significantly from most burial grounds found within Christian and Muslim communities in North-East Sri Lanka. The *tuillum illam* were arenas of public remembrance and celebration—particularly celebrations of the Maveerar Nal. Family and friends of the dead could go there to pay homage, but the social identity of the dead was that of a fighter, not a family member. The important death rituals such as cremation, normally performed by family, were not performed at the *tuillum illam*; the dead soldiers were a state

matter.²⁸ This change in final rites parallels the LTTE's training program for new recruits, which encouraged militants to replace emotional bonds to their kin with feelings of solidarity with their fellow soldiers.²⁹

Both the declaration of Maveerar Nal and the establishment of tuillum illam were engendered by Prabhakaran's desire to use his knowledge of classical Tamil literature as motivation for his men and to attract more cadres.³⁰ While the LTTE was declared a secular organization, its propaganda office was never shy in its allusions to religious notions. The ambiguity on secularism and tapping of religious sources were strategic, and designed to enhance the emotional value of symbols, making the ideology of self-sacrifice more palatable both to the fighters themselves and to those not directly involved in the armed struggle.³¹ The significance of natukal goes far back into South Indian history, where such stones were erected to commemorate local heroes protecting their communities from outside attacks or harassment.³² Such heroes often became tutelary divinities, worshipped with food and flower offerings.³³ The LTTE's revival of parts of old Hindu traditions has been recognized by people who identify closely with the movement.³⁴

Undoubtedly, through its aesthetic practices, the LTTE managed to establish an "emotional regime" that helped mobilize thousands to fight for their cause, especially young people.³⁵ For many, joining the ranks of the LTTE came with an enhanced social status, personal sense of accomplishment, camaraderie, and existential meaning.³⁶ Nonetheless, not enough people volunteered to keep the fight going. Therefore, when the LTTE shifted from guerilla tactics to conventional warfare in 1990, the organization implemented a policy of "one cadre per family" compulsory military service in the areas under their control, and increased forced conscription from schools, playgrounds, temple festivals, and other arenas where youth could be found. The organization did not hesitate to use children in combat. Body counts of LTTE soldiers during the 1990s found that between 40 and 60 percent of the dead fighters were children under the age of 18.³⁷ One UN study found that children as young as 12 to 14 years old were deployed for "massed frontal attacks" in major battles and were used to massacre civilians.³⁸ One of the organization's elite formations, the *Siruthai puligal* (Leopard Brigade), was composed entirely of child soldiers, mainly recruited from LTTE-run orphanages.

THE TAMIL DIASPORA: PROPAGANDA, FEAR, AND REVENUE

The LTTE's martial ideology, of which martyrdom was an essential part,

ranked the organization's military fight the number one priority of the Eelam-Tamil society as whole, including the diaspora. During the Civil War, there was a "division of labor" on the Eelam-Tamil side. The well-off left the country to support the liberation struggle financially, while the poor, mainly from the lower castes, remained to do the actual fighting.³⁹ This was a clear and effective strategy for the LTTE, formalized in the early 1990s through a pass system which required civilians to obtain an exit permit to leave LTTE-controlled areas.⁴⁰ If families wanted to leave permanently, they were occasionally able to do so by signing over their land and property to the LTTE; individuals were also sometimes allowed to leave if another member of their family had joined the ranks, or if a sufficient payment compensated for their withdrawal. The system was practiced strictly but pragmatically, dependent on the potential for extraction of resources, the level of vocal opposition, and the need for conscripts.⁴¹

The Tamil diaspora was a source of propaganda and money for the LTTE. By 2000, an estimated one-third—between 600,000 and 700,000—of the pre-war Tamil population had emigrated, which made the diaspora an essential part of the Eelam-Tamil nation.⁴² When emigration picked up with the conflict's militarization, Eelam-Tamils throughout Europe and North America founded Hindu temples, cultural centers, sports clubs, and language schools for children as part of a civil society in exile. From the early 1980s on, in solidarity with the armed struggle at home, some of these groups began to represent the interests of the LTTE in Western countries, disseminating propaganda and monitoring new

arrivals. With the foundation of the LTTE's international secretariat in London in 1990, the organization sought to establish firm control over this public sphere to collect money for the ongoing fight. In all Tamil settlements in Western countries, there

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was at least one person reporting on the others through the LTTE's chain of command.⁴³ This setup replicated how the LTTE intelligence apparatus functioned in Tamil Sri Lanka, building up archival information on individuals and families through secret informers, thereby also systematically poisoning everyday social interactions with suspicion.⁴⁴ Families and businesses were asked

to contribute on a regular basis, and those who hesitated were reminded of the organization's extensive knowledge of their relatives back home. Threats of potential consequences if they did not pay were often explicit.⁴⁵ One estimate by the Sri Lankan government suggests that the LTTE's annual revenue from the diaspora around this time reached US\$80 million.⁴⁶ Through rituals, flags, posters, cultural performances, and its own media, the LTTE sought to calibrate life in exile to the situation in Sri Lanka, constantly reminding people that the diaspora was an essential part of the ongoing struggle.

The LTTE governed their Tamil constituency at home and abroad, as a community of potential traitors.⁴⁷ From the organization's founding in 1976, Prabhakaran divided the

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work of the LTTE's military wing into three divisions, one of which was responsible for the elimination of traitors.⁴⁸ What became known as "lamp-post killings" was one of the ways in which the organiza-

tion branded itself as the sole representative of Tamil interests in the 1970s and 1980s. Residents of Jaffna woke up in the morning to find people who had been executed during the night strapped to lampposts with a note pinned on their chest telling of their betrayal to the nation. To the LTTE, the "traitor" represented the antithesis of the martyr, "the 'rightful' elimination of traitors provided the means by which everyday policing was legitimated and political sovereignty claimed."⁴⁹ And traitors could potentially be found anywhere. Abroad, the LTTE induced majority acceptance of its economy of suspicion: the diaspora took on an active role in reporting on traitorous financial non-compliance and ideological deviation of others. As noted by the social anthropologist Sharika Thiranagama, the daughter of a human rights activist killed by the LTTE in 1989, the explanation for this accomplishment must be understood both sociologically and psychologically.⁵⁰ Many people in the diaspora had family members still living in Sri Lanka under the iron fist of the LTTE; many also had relatives who voluntarily or involuntarily became members of the organization. The line between the organization and civil society was not easy to draw, and those worthy of trust

were difficult to identify. On a psychological level, the fear of being labeled a traitor and the distrust of fellow Tamils turned the population's acceptance of the LTTE's abusive power into a common identity marker. The self-censorship, silence, and shared knowledge of the reasons for this compliance became a factor that distinguished Eelam-Tamils from other communities. Being a Tamil from Sri Lanka meant keeping the true nature of the LTTE's practices a secret to outsiders.⁵¹ After 2009, this dynamic made a self-critical reckoning difficult. In the harsh words of the University Teachers of Human Rights (Jaffna), one of the few Tamil voices critical of the LTTE inside Sri Lanka throughout the Civil War: "What LTTE supporters have done to their people is so horrendous that they dare not face up to the truth."⁵²

THE LEGACY OF MARTYRDOM


The Sri Lankan Civil War ended brutally on the beaches of Mullivaikal in May 2009. Among tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, most of them held as human shields against their will, the LTTE's soldiers made their last stand against government forces 10 times their strength and succumbed to defeat. The body of Vellupillai Prabhakaran was recovered from the mangrove swamps of the Nandhikadal lagoon on 18 May of that same year. The investigation by the UN Panel of Experts suggests that as many as 40,000 Tamil civilians may have died with him.⁵³

The consequences of the LTTE's demise are still unclear, and 15 years later, the collective shock has still not fully subsided. In Sri Lanka, with a constituency ravaged by war and violence, the challenge for Tamil politicians has been to distance themselves from the brutality of the LTTE while at the same time projecting themselves as champions of Tamil interests vis-à-vis a non-relenting majoritarian Sinhala state. The most common strategy has been to use the monumental human tragedy of 2009 to "gloss over" the less appealing aspects of recent Tamil political history.⁵⁴ One example of this has been to support parents' defiant efforts to clear LTTE's war cemeteries, which were all razed by the Sri Lankan Army after 2009, to have a place to grieve their children's deaths. The re-appropriation of the tuillum illams, often against court orders and military bans, has been focused on honoring the soldiers' individual courage and the families' losses while avoiding consideration of how the soldiers were recruited and those who gave the orders to fight and die.

Sritharan's open embrace of Tamil martyrdom in the interview referenced in the introduction to this paper is something new. It indicates that, after 15

years of heavy military presence and continuous government surveillance of civilian life in the Tamil north and east, the LTTE's brutality against its own population, especially in the final months of the war, is about to be forgiven. His reference to "Tamil nationalist forces as they were before 2009" is to a situation in which the LTTE was in total military and political control of the Tamil constituency and ruthlessly eliminated all opposition. While the TNA and ITAK's current official goal is to peacefully seek a federal constitution for Sri Lanka, the new leader's statements and symbolic performance display the legacy of LTTE's militancy.

Internationally, the LTTE's project has been kept alive, albeit barely, by two competing transnational networks. The first is the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, led from New York, the other is the International Council of Eelam Tamils. Their claim to a continued role in post-war politics is another complication for the Tamil politicians in Sri Lanka. According to these organizations, it is not possible post-2009 to protect Tamil interests from inside Sri Lanka. This must be done by the diaspora. Both organizations strive to realize the LTTE's goal of an independent Tamil state, but have concluded, at least on paper, that this should be accomplished without violence.⁵⁵ Both go through the motions of protest and lobbying, but without an ongoing fight to sustain them and without the power to sanction family members in Sri Lanka. They seem to increasingly take the shape of a shrinking alumni of aging militant Tamil nationalists. Outside the circle of hardcore supporters, many first-generation emigrants have suspended their active work for the Eelam cause and turned their attention to family matters, temples, and village-based associations. In general, the young generation raised in Western countries does not unreservedly carry the LTTE torch. They may support the goal of independence, and many participate in celebrations of Maveerar Nal, yet to most, their engagement is moderated by a concern for human rights and restorative justice that was never a part of the LTTE's politics.⁵⁶ The focus is now bringing about an investigation of the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan Army and on remembering the genocide in 2009. The human tragedy involved in the war's ending makes this understandable, but it is also ironic given that grieving for civilians was never an issue for the LTTE. The same UN reports used by activists to document the Sri Lankan Army's mass killing of Tamil civilians in 2009 make it abundantly clear that both parties committed horrendous war crimes—the LTTE's against the people they claimed to represent, protect, and fight for. While the LTTE's leaders are dead and cannot be taken to court, there are still lessons to be learned. A simplification of the complexities of the Civil War in Sri Lanka into a narrative

of the good and the bad does not bring about the self-examination of political history that is needed to chart a new course for the future of the Eelam-Tamil nation. Instead of rebuilding the Tamil nationalist forces according to LTTE standards, as the new leader of ITAK aims to do, the ideology of martyrdom should be seen as a monument to the futility of resolving political differences by violence. In the Sri Lankan case, this would strengthen the legitimacy of Tamil political claims and put the responsibility of negotiating their resolution on the shoulders of those in power. 

NOTES

1. Velupillai Prabhakaran, "Foreword," in *The Day of the Great Heroes [27-11-1992], Manual. Office of the Great Heroes of Tamililam, Liberation Tigers of Tamililam, Kokkuvil, Tamililam*, trans. Peter Schalk (1992); Here and elsewhere the term "maravar" is used by the LTTE to denote "warrior." However, the choice of the word is not obvious, cf. discussion in the text below and literature referenced in note 25.

2. Romesh Madusanka, "New ITAK leader commemorates dead LTTE cadres as first task," *Daily Mirror*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front-page/New-ITAK-leader-commemorates-dead-LTTE-cadres-as-first-task/238-275532>.

3. "Tamil nationalism must begin from graves of Eelam fighters - Shritharan's exclusive interview," *Tamil Guardian*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-nationalism-must-begin-graves-eelam-fighters-shritharans-exclusive-interview>.

4. Sri Lanka is a country with a high degree of cultural variation. In official statistics the ethnic composition of the population is as follows: Sinhalese 74.9 percent, Sri Lankan Tamils 11.2 percent, Sri Lankan Moors 9.3 percent, Indian Tamils 4.1 percent, other ethnic groups 1.5 percent. In terms of religion, Buddhists make up 70.1 percent of the population, Hindus 12.6 percent, Muslims 9.7 percent, and Roman Catholics and other Christians 7.6 percent, see "Economic and Social Statistics <https://lankastatistics.com/economic/composition-of-population.html>. However, this is far from the whole picture. In terms of identification, there are important sub-groups within all the mentioned ethnic categories, based mainly on caste, local origin, and religious nuances.

5. Section 6 of Sri Lanka's 1972 Constitution reads: "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by section 18(1)(d)."

6. Staff Tamil Guardian, "Remembering 1956 – Sri Lanka's first Anti-Tamil pogrom," *Tamil Guardian*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-1956-sri-lanka-s-first-anti-tamil-pogrom>; Stanley J.

7. "Remembering the 1958 pogrom," *Tamil Guardian*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-1958-pogrom-0>; See also: Varindra Tarzie Vittachi, *Emergency '58: The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots* (Andre Deutsch, 1958). In an interview in 1984, the leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, reflected on the 1958 violence as instrumental in shaping his own political destiny, see *Remembering the 1958 pogrom*,"

8. "Vaddukoddai Resolution," https://www.sangam.org/FB_HIST_DOCS/vaddukod.htm.

9. D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "'Anjanenjan' Amirthalangam; The Firebrand Youth with a Fearless Heart who became a Respected Statesmanlike Tamil Leader," *D.B.S. Jeyaraj*, August 26, 2024, <https://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/?p=82541>.

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13. T. Sabaratnam, "Chapter 8: First Military Operation," *Pirapaharan*, <https://www.sangam.org/Sabaratnam/PirapaharanChap8.htm>.

14. Two important incidents in this regard were the break-up by the police of the World Tamil Research Conference in Jaffna in January 1974, resulting in the death of seven people, and the disturbances in Jaffna in May and June 1981, resulting in the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library with invaluable collections of rare books and manuscripts.

15. Kate Cronin-Furman and Mario Arulthas, "How the Tigers Got Their Stripes: A Case Study of the LTTE's Rise to Power," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 9 (2021).

16. Ibid.

17. Giacomo Mantovan, "Becoming a Fearless Tiger. The Social Conditions for the Production of LTTE Fighters," *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 9 (2023): 37–54. Full oath below: For the supreme cause of our revolutionary movement, which is the liberation of Tamil Eelam, egalitarian and sovereign, I swear the oath that I will fight with all my soul, my life, my body and my goods, and I will freely accept the command of our leader, the honorable Velupillai Prabhakaran. The thirst of the Tigers is the motherland Tamil Eelam [repeated three times].

18. Øivind Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom – the Celebration of Violent Death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," in *Violence Expressed*, ed. Nerina Weiss and Maria Six-Hohenbalken (Ashgate Publishing: 2011).

19. Peter Schalk, "The Revival of Martyr Cults among the Ilavar," *Temenos* 33 (1997): 151–90.

20. Ibid. See also: Ravi Khangai, "Why Should Arjuna Kill? The Bhagavad Gita's Justification of Selective Violence," *American Research Journal of History and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2015): 12–24.

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