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Letters to the Editor

Sri Lanka: My father and the Hansa Regiment: Factual inaccuracies in Dr. Amunugama's memoirs

Tuesday 10 November 2020, by [MOONESINGHE Vinod](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2020).

I do believe that Sarath Amunugama's memoirs will prove a valuable resource for future historians. However, in the cause of historical accuracy, I should like to take issue with what he writes ("April Fifth 1971: High drama in Temple Trees", the book extract published in the Sunday Times of October 4) about my father, the late Anil Moonesinghe and the Hansa Regiment. I quote:

"Not being content with this analysis they approved the attempt, which was mere eyewash, of Anil Moonesinghe to set up a workers army, a la Trotsky [sic], to defend the Government. A raggle taggle bunch of superannuated workers, who were refused guns by the army which in any case was also desperately short of firearms, were marched up and down by 'General' Anil Moonesinghe who was happily living through his Marxist fantasies that he had acquired in London amidst some armchair revolutionaries. This LSSP detachment, which was called the 'Hansa regiment', was so ridiculous that even their leaders like NM and Colvin gave it a wide berth."

To deal first with the so-called "armchair revolutionaries", my father became a Marxist in Sri Lanka, while still at school, in response to the heavy-handed, racist British colonial regime; joining an underground cell of the (then-banned) Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In London, he joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, most of whom were working-class trade unionists. He belonged to the group led by Tony Cliff - a Palestine-born Jew, hounded from his motherland by the militant Zionists, angry at his opposition to their racist attacks and his active support for the Palestinian revolt. My father worked as a crane operator in a factory, being an active member of the Transport and General Workers Union, as well as serving in the National Council of Labour Colleges.

Nobody who knew my father at all would have been able to imagine him posturing as a "general". An extremely down-to-earth, practical person, he led by example - as Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) chair, he personally got into a service pit at the Werahera workshops, and serviced eight buses in a day, just to show it could be done. However, while my father's reputation attests to his qualities, not so the Hansa Regiment, about which the general public knows very little.

To face 15,000-20,000 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgents, the government had a tiny army, with an establishment of 4,000, and a small Police force, numbering about 10,000; leaving large swathes of the country unguarded. While the security forces were spread over the island, the JVP concentrated its forces in a few areas, where they had numerical superiority. This threatened the security of police stations in the danger zones, which were severely undermanned, and some fell to JVP assaults - including the strategic Warakapola police station, on the main route to Kandy and

to the North.

In response to this manpower shortage, my father offered to create a unit of volunteers from among the CTB workers, to which Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, as well as the LSSP leadership, responded with alacrity. Accordingly, he assembled the volunteers at the Narahenpita CTB head office, and gave them basic training. These formed the core of the Hansa Regiment.

In view of the shortage of weapons (the Army was equipped with antiquated Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifles, and had only 1,000 grenades in the entire country at the time), the Prime Minister arranged for the Hansa Regiment to be issued with 450 shotguns - which actually have certain advantages in close combat.

My father deployed a large contingent of the Hansa Regiment to Kegalle district (a JVP stronghold), with billets in the Thulhiriya textile mill quarters. His private secretary, Rajawardhana, who had received musketry training as a cadet, commanded this unit in consultation with a representative each of the trade unions affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Communist Party.

Rajawardhana says that they deployed ad-hoc squads and platoons to police stations in Kegalle and Kurunegala districts, ranging from Mirigama in the south to Polgahawela in the north, and from Narammala in the west to Kegalle in the east. Several times, they came under attack by the JVP, but repulsed these assaults, with losses.

Meanwhile, the LSSP set up another volunteer contingent of the Hansa Regiment, stationed in the Gampaha District, guarding the approaches to Colombo. Veteran leftist Reggie Mendis, who had lost his arm deflecting a bomb intended for Colvin R. de Silva, commanded it. Reggie might be the "superannuated worker" to whom Amunugama refers. Very few of the volunteers had retired, or were elderly. Rajawardhana says that most of the CTB volunteers came from among drivers, conductors and mechanics, hardened by work, and not the clerical workers.

CTB bus crews also proved useful in other ways. The government found accurate information lacking. Therefore, my father instructed Dudley Wijesiri, then in charge of the CTB's employees' councils programme, to collect intelligence from bus crews and other CTB employees, about the strength and deployment of the JVP. These reports, coded "Cantab" were submitted to the government. General Sepala Attygalle, the Army commander, acknowledged at the time the superiority of "Cantab" information to that available from military intelligence.

Once order had been restored, the government disbanded the Hansa Regiment. My father was opposed to this, as he felt the force, as a form of workers' republican guard, would be a deterrent to any attempted coup d'état against the government - the abortive coup of 1961 still remained fresh in people's minds. Indeed, many commentators believe that the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile fell so easily to the Right-wing Pinochet coup because it failed to arm the workers to defend the republic. Fortunately, no coup attempt occurred in Sri Lanka in this period, although as Amunugama notes, rumours were rife about the possibility.

I am sure that Amunugama, an honourable man, must be unaware of the facts laid out above, and his errors are due to misinformation, probably obtained second-hand.

Vinod Moonesinghe

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