

Sri Lanka: A Story from a Defeated Struggle

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In January 2020, Sri Lanka's president confirmed what many already feared: that more than 20,000 people who disappeared during the country's civil war were dead. They were among the victims of the repression of the Tamil Tigers in May 2009. The Tigers' defeat ended, for now, 26 years of military struggle for self-determination by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

In *Losing Santhia: Life and Loss in the Struggle for Tamil Eelam*, Australian socialist Ben Hillier tells the story of one participant in this struggle. Santhia was a leading member of the Tamil Tigers who joined the movement as a teenager and died as a refugee in Indonesia, in 2017. She was 42 years old.

Speaking with surviving activists and refugees, Hillier combines their memories of Santhia with the history of the conflict. Hillier's illustrated essay throughout contains excerpts of poetry written by women members of the Tamil Tigers. The text is part political commentary and part reporting from the aftermath of the Tigers' defeat.

Oppression and Resistance

At its peak, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a formidable movement, capable of resisting state forces and establishing its own de-facto state in the north of Sri Lanka. Hillier relays how people he interviewed expressed their pride as members of an oppressed minority who finally won a state they felt was their own.

Hillier traces the roots of the conflict to Sri Lanka's history as a British colony. Like other colonial powers, the British applied a strategy of divide and rule on the island, pitting the Tamil minority against the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. The end of British colonialism came as a result of a negotiated settlement that left a Buddhist Sinhalese elite in political power. Unlike in other former colonies where a common struggle against the colonial power brought forth a new national identity, the dividing lines drawn by the British persisted.

After independence, religion, ethnicity, and state power increasingly combined into a reactionary form of nationalism, and "from the 1960s 'Sinhalese' and 'Buddhist' became synonymous." This combination was symbolized by the increasing political activism and power of Buddhist monks who regarded the Tamil minority as an existential threat to the Buddhist Sinhalese. The 1972 constitution defined the country as a "unitary state," denying the Tamils a right to self-determination.

During these years, Sri Lanka had a large, self-declared Marxist left. A nominally Trotskyist party, the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party, literally: Lanka Equal Society Party), had gained mass support in the late forties and joined the Fourth International. In his memoirs, Livio Maitan, a leader of the Fourth International at the time, discussed the evolution of the party.* Already in 1960 he described the situation the LSSP found itself in: "Given its largely Sinhalese composition, it always appeared as a party of the 'other' nationality to Indian [Tamil] workers," while its support for minority rights was "not seen as truly 'national' from the point of view of broad layers of backward workers and other

Sinhalese.”

To overcome this weakness, the party needed to create organic links between the movements of Tamil and Sinhalese workers, “an absolute condition for which,” Maitan wrote, was “the intransigent defense, without any hesitation or holding back, of the minority’s national rights.” Unfortunately, the LSSP choose the opposite path and supported Sinhalese bourgeois political forces. A few years after Maitan urged it to support the rights of the Tamil minority, the LSSP was expelled from the Fourth International.

Sinhalese chauvinists increasingly whipped up violence against the Tamil minority, leading to bloody pogroms. During the seventies, Tamil radicals started to form armed revolutionary groups. Some of these saw their struggle as part of a revolution that needed to be Sri Lanka-wide and considered the Sinhalese working class as a potential ally. But in the absence of strong, reliable allies among the Sinhalese and facing increasing racist violence, Tamil movements increasingly focused on their national struggle.

A turning point would be a 1983 pogrom known as “Black July.” Hillier writes, “The violence spiraled as monks, backed by the police and military, mobilized Sinhalese mobs in more orgies of violence.” The violence left as many as three thousand dead and more than one hundred thousand homeless. Tamil youth flocked to join the armed movements, chief among them the LTTE. Some years later, Santhia, still in high school, joined the Tamil Tigers.

The Tiger State

During years of war, the Tamil Tigers built up strength and support. Eventually, in early 2002, they signed a ceasefire with the Sri Lanka government, allowing the Tigers to consolidate their position. The Tigers constructed a shadow administration, with its own police and judicial system, education and health institutions, among other entities. By this time, the LTTE had abandoned the demand for secession, instead demanding a form of autonomy.

But this situation was temporary, as different Sinhalese forces opposed the kind of structural changes that would have been required to meet Tamil demands for self-determination. Buddhist monks organized Sinhala chauvinist mobilizations against any kind of federal system or power sharing. Hillier quotes an army general who bitterly complained about being victimized by the contempt expressed by Tamil youth. All liberation movements, Hiller writes, share something: “some proud authority unable to comprehend the hatred of the people whose everyday deference is interpreted as a sincere display, rather than a performance later cursed in private.”

Internationally, the movement became known for assassinations as it pioneered suicide-bombing as method of attack. But the movement cannot be reduced to this violence, and Hillier shows how it was a contradictory combination of liberation and authoritarianism. The movement’s need for mobilization went against conservative norms and challenged ideas of hierarchies based on caste, gender, and clan. The involvement of women in the struggle, including in armed operations, went against sexist norms as the necessity of mobilization broke old taboos. Women gained new positions of authority and confidence. Their gains were real, but their position remained contradictory as the Tigers also enforced sexist norms. For example, women working in civilian Tiger institutions were required to wear traditional and restrictive dresses. At other times, caste practices were tolerated on pragmatic grounds.

Like many other armed movements, the Tigers extended the logic of war beyond that of the fight against the government army. To assert their dominance over the Tamil movement, the LTTE organized the assassination of leaders of rival Tamil movements and of socialists who opposed its

orientation toward guerrilla struggle. Inside the movement, power ultimately remained in the hands of a patriarchal figure; the authority of founder and leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was unchallenged. This was a liberation movement without democracy.

Defeat

In 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa, a hard-line Sinhalese chauvinist (and older brother of the current president) won the Sri Lanka presidential election. Sinhalese chauvinist forces continued to mobilize to crush the Tamil movement. The Tigers had developed more and more into a conventional army, but in purely military terms, they were no match for the government army. In Hillier's estimation, the ultimate cause for the defeat of the Tamil Tigers lies in a changing international situation. Hillier describes the role of India, the United States, Canada, and European powers in international crackdowns against the Tigers' fundraising in the Tamil diaspora and in blocking arms shipments.

With the aid of a faction of traitorous former Tigers, the Sri Lankan state went on the offensive. As state governments pushed through the Tiger defenses, more and more people fled. In early 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared a "No Fire Zone" within Tiger-held territory, supposedly to provide safety to civilian refugees. The army subjected the No Fire Zone to sustained bombardment. The government refused all attempts to broker a ceasefire and continued the offensive. In May 2009, Prabhakaran himself was killed.

The victory of the Sri Lankan state was made possible, in part, by Western support, but as Hillier writes, aid for it "also came from states at odds with the West. Aid worth billions of dollars was offered by China, Russia, Iran, Libya, and Pakistan." The Tamils' international isolation was complete. On May 27, 2009, an Orwellian UN Human Rights Council resolution praised the government of Sri Lanka for "protecting human rights," while condemning acts of terrorism by the Tigers.

How many were killed in the war is unknown. In addition to thousands of combatants, tens of thousands of civilians were killed—most were killed by government forces. Attempts to investigate the scale of the killings and human rights violations were obstructed by the Sri Lankan government and its international allies. In February 2020, Mahinda Rajapaksa, appointed as prime minister by his brother a few months earlier, declared Sri Lanka was withdrawing from a United Nations resolution investigating alleged war crimes.

The war was lost, and what remains of the Tamil movement is now desperately struggling to defend minimal democratic rights.

Questions for the Future

Hillier ends his essay by asking, what next? The areas of the former Tamil Tiger state have become occupied territory. After the 2015 election defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa by his former ally Maithripala Sirisena, repression eased somewhat, but the government's policy of Sinhalization continues. Drawing a comparison with policies of the Israeli state, Hillier describes it as a strategy of creating "facts on the ground." The Tamil language is erased from the public sphere as streets and other place names are changed, Sinhala capital and the army's economic projects push out Tamil enterprises, and the government attempts to change the demographic composition of the area by bringing in large numbers of Sinhala.

The last section of the book is composed of the text "Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle," written by the Tigers' chief negotiator Anton Balasingham on behalf of the Tigers' political committee in 1983. It describes the early Tamil Tiger view of the history of the island, of the

national question, and of their rationale for launching a military struggle. The text is an historical document, showing how, like many other national movements at the time, the Tamil Tigers expressed their struggle in “Marxist-Leninist” terms, even though the movement never claimed to be communist.

Rather than an academic article or a comprehensive overview of the complicated history of the struggle, Losing Santhia is a text that helps the reader understand the motivations and viewpoints of participants in an often ignored or mischaracterized struggle. The logical allies of the Tamils, Hillier writes, “remain the impoverished Sinhalese workers and peasants. ... It remains the island’s greatest political catastrophe that the once powerful Sinhalese left failed to stand with the Tamils and launch a united fight for the liberation of all exploited and oppressed people.”

By letting Tigers speak for themselves, Hillier enables readers to hear from survivors of this tragedy.

Note

*Livio Maitan, *Memoirs of a Critical Communist. Towards a History of the Fourth International* (Dagenham: Merlin Press, 2019).

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