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Ten Bullets to One, Twenty to Another

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Independence was handed to Ceylon's elite on a platter. 'Think of Ceylon as a little bit of England,' Oliver Ernest Goonetilleke, the first native governor-general, said. This was a point of pride. Don Stephen Senanayake, the country's first prime minister, remarked: 'There has been no rebellion in Ceylon, no non-cooperation movement and no fifth column. We were among the peoples who gave full collaboration while Britain was hard-pressed.' After independence in 1948, Ceylon alone among the former colonies not only retained but promoted the monarchy: the Union Jack flew alongside the Ceylon flag; a new constitution was drafted by an LSE professor, Ivor Jennings; Colombo debutantes were presented at Buckingham Palace; and, thanks to some genealogical ingenuity, George VI was recognised as the latest monarch in the ancient line of Kandyan kings. While the rest of the empire in Asia smouldered – in India there was Partition, in Malaya the Emergency, in Burma the civil war – Ceylon became Whitehall's model for the transfer of colonial power. 'There was no fight for that freedom which involved a fight for principles, policies and programmes,' Solomon Ridgeway Bandaranaike, the anti-colonial head of state who took power in 1956, said when he reviewed the transition a decade later. 'It just came overnight. We just woke up one day and were told: "You are a dominion now."'

Today, eight years after the Sinhala-Buddhist regime defeated a militarised Tamil rebel state, ending three decades of civil war, there's no shortage of explanations of how Ceylon – rechristened the 'Resplendent Lanka' in 1972 – embarked on one of the bloodiest trajectories of any state in the 21st century. Sri Lanka has become a centre for the human rights industry. The offices of NGOs line the streets of Jaffna town. Professional gurus of peace and reconciliation have the resources to fund all manner of academic projects so long as they have the correct subject headings: 'transitional justice', 'ethnic violence', 'even-handed peace-building', 'war crimes studies'. International agencies are determined to get the Sri Lankan government to punish those responsible for the war. Many Sri Lankans hoped that the official report of the United Nations Human Rights Council, released in September 2015, would fill in some of the gaps, but the findings only confirmed what everyone already knew: that mass atrocities were committed by both sides in the war, and that both sides had made strenuous efforts to cover them up.

Maithripala Sirisena, the current president, was the minister of health in the last government and won a surprise victory in the 2015 election against his former boss, Mahinda Rajapaksa. Sirisena would probably have been reluctant to prosecute his former patrons, who still command allegiance from much of the military, had he not been assured that in return for steering Sri Lanka away from China and back towards the West he could count on the backing of international institutions. But Colombo was never fully under Beijing's sway: the war against the Tigers was endorsed, and in part designed, by the United States Pacific Command, which publicly kept its distance from the counterinsurgency campaign. The principal architect of the war, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (Mahinda's brother), is a US citizen and holds the distinction of being the first American since MacArthur to win a major war in Asia. His war of annihilation against the Tigers has been admired by military establishments in Nigeria, Myanmar, the Philippines and other states facing local insurgencies. The eradication

of separatist movements has become acceptable policy in places where it was no longer thought practicable or advisable, thanks to Sri Lanka.

From the perspective of British imperial power, several things set Sri Lanka apart from most of the subcontinent. First, no part of the island had been under Muslim rule. In northern India and Malaya, deals had had to be struck with local princes and sultans, but in Ceylon the British, once they'd taken the island from the Dutch in the Napoleonic wars, found there was only one local lord left to deal with. King Vikrama Rajasinha believed he could hold the city of Kandy, which is situated in the jungle of the central highlands – his kingdom had withstood Europeans before. With Napoleon threatening Europe, Robert Brownrigg, the British governor at Colombo, was instructed not to drain the treasury with an unnecessary adventure. But he was ambitious for rank and title, and so found an excuse: King Vikrama, he claimed, had committed acts of barbarism against local traders. Brownrigg led a force made up of British, Javanese, Africans, Indians and Malays to take the city. Vikrama was already fending off a revolt of his own lords. The British entered the city unopposed.

The surrender of the Kingdom of Kandy in 1815 marked the end of indigenous rule on the island. This meant that in Ceylon the empire was never forced to parry with any strategy of indirect rule – in this respect the colony more resembled New Zealand than India. There was no longer a clearly defined local elite to be cultivated by the British, so one had to be created. In the 19th century, Western capital didn't reach much further than the coasts, but the missionaries had got further, especially in the north, and nurtured an English-speaking Sinhala and Tamil class that could be groomed for the local administration (there were more Sinhalese in government office, but the proportion of Tamils was much higher than in the general population). A Burgher Christian class of mixed ancestry left behind by Portuguese and Dutch rule joined this newer English-speaking group to form a ruling class that identified more with the British Empire than with the Sinhalese majority.

Several of the major challenges faced by newly independent Ceylon were bequeathed by the colonial administration. First, there was the indeterminate status of the 'Indian' Tamils. These were labourers whom the British had brought over from Tamil Nadu in the 19th century to work the tea plantations in Ceylon's central hill country. By independence they numbered more than a million and had been labelled a separate ethnic group in the 1911 colonial census. The ethnic categories of colonial rule – 'Indian' Tamils, indigenous Tamils, Sinhala (each additionally complicated by markers of caste) – were taken up by the new state. The problem was how to resolve the status of the 'Indian' Tamils, who naturally supported the left. In its first eight years of independence, the party of the Tamil-Sinhala elite – the United National Party – dominated parliament and kept leftist parties at bay. (The Trotskyite Lanka Sama Samaja Party was the main opposition, and the Bolshevik Samasamaja Party and the Ceylon Workers' Party won a handful of seats.) In 1948, the UNP dealt a major blow to the left when parliament passed the Ceylon Citizen Act, which barred Indian Tamils from political representation. Instead, the votes of the Sinhalese who lived alongside them in the district of Kandy were assigned greater value. It's common enough in liberal democracies for votes in one area to count more than votes in another, but not for the votes of one local group to be weighted so that they 'virtually' represent a larger group with diametrically opposed interests.

The Citizen Act was the first of several Sinhalese schemes for political exclusion. The next target was the country's indigenous Tamils. The low proportion of Sinhalese in government office was another remnant of colonial rule, and was bound to be corrected by any political party canny enough to trade on the identitarian cause for seats in parliament. Anyone who could politicise the grievances of the Sinhalese majority effectively would be a force to reckon with. The leftist parties, whose membership cut across ethnic lines, hesitated to seek political gains in this way. Their first, fleeting success came with the general strike of 1953 – the Great Hartal – when a dramatic rise in rice prices caused by the Korean War momentarily turned the population against the government of Senanayake's son, Dudley, who took refuge with his cabinet on a British battleship docked in Colombo harbour. But the LSSP and other Marxist parties failed to translate the general strike into political results; they were still too deferential to the parliamentary system. With British assistance Dudley regained control and declared martial law. The moment was lost.

The levers of ethnic nationalism were pulled three years later by Solomon Bandaranaike, a member of the burgher class who had broken away from the Nationalist Party and used his

private fortune to found the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which made a bid to win the Sinhalese peasant vote by declaring Sinhala the national language. This was a dangerous game for a member of the elite to play. Promising a 'deepening socialism', Bandaranaike convinced the Trotskyite LSSP to join him in forming a government. 'I have never found anything to excite the people in quite the way this language issue does,' Bandaranaike told a reporter. But his attempt to build a Sinhalese political bloc wasn't enough for some. Two years after gaining power, Bandaranaike was shot on his own verandah by a Buddhist monk. 'A foolish man dressed in the robes of a *bhikkhu* fired some shots at me in my bungalow this morning,' Bandaranaike told the nation in English from his deathbed. 'I appeal to all concerned to show compassion to this man and not to try to wreak vengeance on him.'

Violent Buddhists: their existence still perplexes those who get their karma in the West, but they are nothing new. Buddhist ethics can be severe, but in a country where 'Buddhist eggs' – pre-cracked and murder-free – are available on the shelves of shops, there are ways of making most precepts more accommodating. In Sri Lanka in recent years, violence has been carried out by the Bodu Bala Sena, the Buddhist Power Army, an organisation that primarily targets the island's Muslims. Support for this group is widespread in Sri Lanka, where political power and Buddhism have been closely linked since the Anuradhapura kings became followers of the Buddha in the third century BCE. The ancient chronicles of the Buddhist kingdoms are still familiar to ordinary Sri Lankans. Political Buddhism in its virulent contemporary form, however, was another product of the encounter with the British.

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The British missionaries converted Ceylon's inhabitants on a much larger scale than the Portuguese and Dutch had, imperilling the future of the Buddhist *sangha* and its near monopoly of religious education on the island. In the 19th century, the monks began to resist. Ironically, European scholars at the time were lending new credibility to Buddhism, raising it to the status of a world religion. Some orientalist went so far as to treat it as a source of 'Aryan' wisdom. The footsoldiers of orientalism were imperial civil servants who collected ancient Tibetan and Pali manuscripts and sent them to learned societies in Europe, whose publications and interpretations ignited curiosity about Buddhism in Europe and the United States, and changed the way it was seen by Buddhists themselves in the colonies.

The invention of Buddhism in the West inspired many to make long journeys in order to meet the sages of the East. In Sri Lanka, the most influential of these spiritual tourists was Henry Steel Olcott, a former Union Army colonel and theosophist from New Jersey whose profile appears on Sri Lankan stamps and who is claimed as one of the 'heroes of independence'. After the American Civil War, Olcott grew disgusted by what he saw as the hypocrisies of liberal Protestantism. In Buddhism he found a more congenial idea of divinity, and a plan for human unity that was broader and more appealing than Lincoln's. In 1878, Olcott published a visionary pamphlet called *A Budget of American History*, in which he combined amateur readings of Buddhism with inflated nationalism. His history of America began with the Aztecs and Eskimos and culminated in comparative studies of Native American and Asian rituals, which he presented as evidence for a single world-uniting religion. America, in Olcott's view, was the stage on which all the world's religions were destined to meet. He claimed they were already there in embryo, the Vikings having brought pagan spirits to the land, and the religion of the Buddha having arrived 'at a very early epoch'. In 1879, Olcott travelled to India with his fellow theosophist, Madame Blavatsky. Unlike Blavatsky, Olcott wasn't content with merely adding to his mystical store-chest; he was hell-bent on saving the land from 'the common enemy – Christianity'. 'Look to the West,' he wrote, 'and you will find a sensual clergy; a demoralising theology; a forged book; the substitution of faith for merit; of words for deeds.' But look to the East, and you will encounter 'the way to purification, illumination, power, beautitude [sic]'. His journey to Sri Lanka the following year had dramatic consequences. The Buddhist revival was already under way on the island, and the monks couldn't believe their luck when a white, anti-colonial Buddhist arrived.

In fumbling Pali, Olcott and Blavatsky pledged their allegiance to Lord Buddha in the southern port city of Galle. Olcott then went on a lecture tour, distributed anti-Christian pamphlets, and founded the Buddhist Theosophical Society and the Buddhist Educational Movement. He wasn't above using Christian tactics against the missionaries, and in 1881 he published *A Buddhist Catechism*, in Sinhala and English, which is still found in Sri Lankan schools today. When Catholic priests converted a well at a Buddhist pilgrimage site into a

Lourdes-like healing shrine, Olcott converted it back and performed his own bogus healings there, using mesmerism and modern medicine to treat patients, citing any minor improvement in their health as proof of Buddhism's superiority. British colonial reports registered concern about Olcott's activities on the island, which increased after Buddhist-Christian riots broke out in 1883 in Kotahena, Colombo's Catholic stronghold. 'There can be no question that Colonel Olcott really possesses considerable influence among the Buddhist Community,' one British intelligence report read. 'On the other hand, my own communications with leading Buddhists lead me to suspect that he somewhat overestimates both his own knowledge of their doctrines and affairs, and the amount of influence which he exercises over their Counsels.'

Olcott made contact with a young Buddhist called Don David Hewavitarane, who took the name Anagarika Dharmapala ('homeless protector of the Dharma'). Dharmapala's status in Sri Lanka today is comparable with Gandhi's in India, but though they were of the same generation, Dharmapala's anti-Western ideas had already been taken up by the time Gandhi launched the Salt March in 1930. Dharmapala was the son of a wealthy trading family which had moved to Colombo in the boom years of the 1850s and was part of the new urban Sinhala bourgeoisie unable to break into the elite circles of Christian Ceylonese. His notions of island revolution were bolstered by schoolboy readings of Shelley's 'Queen Mab', and his knowledge of Buddhist and Christian texts made him a useful apprentice to Olcott and Blavatsky, who took the teenager with them on their travels. With his white robes and faraway gaze, Dharmapala's charisma soon outshone that of his wards. In his early twenties, Dharmapala became the best-known anti-colonial agitator in the land, addressing crowds of thousands and travelling around the globe – Japan, the US, Europe – to collect funds for the Buddhist cause. Dharmapala's biographer, Steven Kemper, calls him 'more of an ascetic than a political leader', but it was partly because of his asceticism that Dharmapala's fusion of Sinhala-Buddhist identity and nationalism caught the imagination. From reading the German racial theorist Max Müller, he learned to consecrate Sinhala blood as 'Aryan'; in Buddhism he found a religion that could unite the people better than Hinduism could with its local gods. He began to preach against the British to the new Buddhist intelligentsia in small towns and villages. His approach was very different from Gandhi's:

You should assault the lawless British wherever you see them. In front of every house make a scarecrow of the white-man with banana trunks. Deck the scarecrow with a pair of trousers, and beat it in front of your children. Then when your children grow up they will assault the alien British.

Dharmapala had little patience for the Buddhist monks, who 'without working for the race and the nation ... exist only to fill their spittoons'. His form of Buddhist populism encouraged lay participation. Hounded by colonial police, imprisoned in Calcutta, perpetually scrounging for funds, he anticipated many of the anti-colonial activists who would follow him. But his unflagging energy was primarily devoted to restoring and recovering Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka and India. 'He wanted Buddhist unity for one purpose: recovering a site of importance to all Buddhists, Bodhi Gaya,' Kemper writes. The significance of recovering the location of Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bihar wasn't lost on Olcott, but the worship of Buddhist relics was too much for him. He thought the canine of the Buddha housed in the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy looked like an animal incisor, though he conceded with Blavatsky that it could have come from a previous incarnation of the Buddha, who might once have been a tiger. Olcott and Dharmapala fell out over the relics question, but Dharmapala's drive to recover Buddhist sites in India had some success, as he paid maharajas to allow Buddhist pilgrims access to the sacred sites so that they could restore them and build settlements around them. Dharmapala's activism was critical to the revival of Buddhist practice in India: by the turn of the century the place of Buddhism in the country had been secured, and Dalits began to turn to it as a way out of the caste system. Ambedkar announced in 1935 his intention to leave Hinduism, and converted to Buddhism in 1956. Buddhist-Dalit parties have been an important political presence ever since.

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In Sri Lanka today the Buddhist Power Army (BBS), along with many more moderate Sinhalese, treat Dharmapala as an icon. The Muslim population has replaced the Tamils as the preferred target. In 2014, three Muslims were killed defending a mosque in Dharga Town,

eighty kilometres south of Colombo, by BBS rioters who burned shops and so displaced thousands of Muslims across the Kalutara District. The attitudes that drive such incidents are not uncommon. In a surgery theatre at a hospital in Kandy, an anaesthetist called Saman Nanayakkara, who supports the BBS, told me that Muslim obstetricians in the country intentionally distort the fallopian tubes of Sinhalese women. He spoke of his fears of Muslims slipping infertility tablets into pastries they sell to Sinhalese, or buying up all the land in Sri Lanka. Like many BBS supporters, Nanayakkara stressed that although the Sinhalese may be a majority inside the country, in the greater region they are a minority surrounded by Muslims. 'We don't want to become like the Maldives,' he told me. (People in the Maldives speak a variant of the same thousand-year-old Indo-Aryan language from which Sinhala derives.) At the BBS headquarters in Colombo, the head spokesman of the organisation, a smooth operator called Dilanthe Withanage, who got his training as a computer programmer in Tbilisi, explained his efforts to build up a regional Buddhist fundamentalist network. 'We have a small group in Dhaka and have brothers in Thailand and Myanmar,' he told me, showing me snapshots of them on his phone, 'but we don't have Saudi money.' The BBS once enjoyed close relations with the Rajapaksa government – Withanage worked for it as a policy adviser – but since Rajapaksa's loss in the 2015 elections, relations have soured. The Rajapaksa brothers now blame the BBS for driving away the Muslim vote.

Most of the swell of support for Sinhala ethnic nationalism, however, hasn't come from the Buddhist fundamentalists on the political right, but from elements originating on the communist left. Since independence, Sri Lanka has been able to field four or five leftist parties at a time – too many, in practice. In the late 1960s, new international leftist currents in the country increased the number of ideological splits. When Bandaranaike's wife, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, became head of the SLFP and the world's first female elected head of state, she was initially treated as a stand-in for her late husband. But she quickly emerged as the country's most consequential leader to date – a figure with close resemblances to Indira Gandhi, with whom she co-ordinated internationally. She pledged to continue her husband's policies, including the 'Sinhala Only' Act, which guaranteed more places for Sinhalese in government office and made Buddhism the 'foremost religion' in the land. Like Indira Gandhi, she set out on a programme of nationalisation, which took in petrol stations and tea plantations. This provoked the anger of Britain and the US, which promptly shut off aid. Sirimavo Bandaranaike wanted a closer relationship with the Soviet Union and became a champion of the Non-Aligned Movement, going on to host one of its major conferences in Colombo. In 1965, faced with a faltering economy and a revolt in her own party caused by her nationalisation of several newspapers, she followed the same strategy as her husband and invited the mostly rural LSSP into government, but lost the election to Dudley Senanayake. When she returned to power four years later, many of her former supporters on the left turned on her. A faction of Marxist youths called the People's Liberation Front (JVP) broke with all official parties and went to war against the state.

The JVP uprising of 1971 was one of the largest youth revolts in modern history. Its organisation and momentum still baffle students of revolution. The JVP's leader was Rohana Wijeweera, the son of a rural communist family, who had studied to be a doctor at Lumumba University in Moscow and worked as an agricultural labourer on a collective farm in Moldova. When he returned to Sri Lanka he set about organising the up-country Sinhalese villagers, whose sense of grievance had been stoked by a series of Sinhalese nationalist governments. Faced with the Sino-Soviet split, Wijeweera didn't hesitate to choose Beijing. In 1971, he was arrested for plotting against the government. The JVP rebellion began as a response to his arrest; he tried to control it using a shortwave radio he'd smuggled into his prison cell. The uprising had no vanguard and not much of a plan; it was a hastily assembled pitchfork rebellion that was crushed almost as soon as it had started. But the size of the movement was staggering: some fifty thousand youths descended on Colombo from towns and villages in the southern and central provinces. The violence escalated into a two-week-long inter-Sinhala civil war, in which Bandaranaike's government killed more than 15,000 youths with near universal international support. Beijing wanted nothing to do with Wijeweera's Maoist self-fashioning: Zhou Enlai offered Bandaranaike weapons with which to stamp out the JVP. With Wijeweera in prison, the remaining JVP hardliners went underground – they would reappear in the 1980s – but the concerns they had raised did not go unheeded by the Bandaranaike government. The JVP's revolt was the beginning of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The constitution drafted in 1972 by Sirimavo Bandaranaike to appease JVP sympathisers – it gave Sinhalese more government jobs and formally severed all colonial ties – provoked the consolidation of the two major Tamil parties in the north into the Tamil United Front (TULF). For the first time since independence, the demand for a separate Tamil homeland became widespread: TULF leaders envisioned a large swathe of the north-east of the island as an autonomous region. By the 1970s, with Bandaranaike's exclusion policies starting to take effect, a younger generation of Tamils, with less patience and less reverence for the parliamentary system, began to militarise. The economic downturn that had begun under Bandaranaike and worsened during the liberal-market interlude of President J.R. Jayewardene, worked in their favour. By steering the state in a liberal direction, Jayewardene, who became president in 1978, provoked Indira Gandhi. Fresh from her dramatic victory over Pakistan in East Bengal, she wasn't about to let Sri Lanka leave the Non-Aligned Movement and become an ally of the West. The more radical Tamil cadres were invited to India and training camps were established in Himachal Pradesh. The rumour circulated in Sri Lanka that Indira herself saluted them on arrival. Later recruits were trained at Tamil Nadu, where local governments sheltered them. Indian intelligence considered these units a useful prop in negotiations with Colombo, but they ended up sparking a military intervention that led to a humiliating Indian defeat.

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The Tamil Tigers were just one among several militant Tamil youth groups, but from the start they were distinguished by a special ruthlessness. Their leader was the 20-year-old Velupillai Prabhakaran, a high-school dropout whose training came from watching Westerns. As a teenager, Prabhakaran participated in the assassination of the governor of Jaffna. He also robbed banks to fund his political activities. Later, he formed alliances of convenience with other Tamil guerrilla groups, which he then stabbed in the back. Unlike other Tamil separatists, Prabhakaran prioritised the killing of Tamil politicians who were willing to deal with the Sri Lankan state. His first major attack on the Sri Lankan Army was an ambush in 1983 that wildly exceeded his expectations: 13 SLA officers were killed on patrol in Jaffna, inciting anti-Tamil pogroms in the south of the country around Colombo, and encouraging the underground JVP to reform. Entire Tamil communities were forced to flee their homes and enter refugee camps or move abroad. Thousands went to India to join the Tamil guerrillas. Most groups hadn't enough time or resources to indoctrinate and train them all, but Prabhakaran had enough charisma and a simple enough goal to attract them. In 1986, he staged his own Night of the Long Knives, destroying the LTTE's main rival and parent organisation, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, in a surprise attack that killed more than four hundred of its members.

In the late 1980s the Tigers were much romanticised, especially among the Tamil diaspora. The group perfected the suicide bomber attack; combatants wore cyanide necklaces they were instructed to consume on capture; female units with long tight braids served as equals with most of the men; and there was the monkish aura of the leader himself, whose close escapes from the SLA became the stuff of legend. Even former members of the LTTE, now disenchanted with its violent ways, admit the power of Prabhakaran's aura. According to one former Tiger:

If he met someone once, he would never forget them. We were a small organisation and he would give ten bullets to one person and twenty bullets to another person and then he would remember exactly how many bullets we had left. He was very organised.

Prabhakaran was rarely seen by Tiger grunts, except at his annual National Day address. His appearance wasn't striking: he was pudgy, with the obligatory Tiger moustache and a small baseball cap, and looked more like a retired security guard than a fanatical rebel leader. Norwegian peace brokers recall his 'squeaky voice' and 'underwhelming' presence, and that he quizzed them about *The Heroes of Telemark*, a submarine action film about the Norwegian resistance in the Second World War. Other celebrity Tigers were closer to type. They included the chief ideologue, Anton Balasingham, a slick former journalist who translated the Tigers' demands for 'Eelam' – the ancient Tamil word for the island – into the idiom of Third Worldist struggle, and prevaricated expertly on behalf of the Tigers in international negotiations. The second-in-command was Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan

(Karuna Amman), who was responsible for indoctrination and introduced the policy of recruiting children. The state created by the Tigers could be fairly described as fascist: it demanded total obedience to the leader, exaltation of violence and a cult of civic purity. New social rituals, such as Tigers marrying in their camouflage fatigues, proliferated. The LTTE state had Tiger post offices, Tiger grocery stores and a Tiger television channel, all subordinated to the military.

With such infrastructure in place, it is curious that Prabhakaran and the Tigers did not avail themselves more of two hundred years of the Tamil ideology and mythology. As David Shulman shows in his playful and supple 'biography' of Tamil language and poetics, speaking such an ancient language gave the separatists unusually rich resources to draw on. Not only had ancient Pandyan and Chola dynasties once conquered Sri Lanka, but Tamil speakers had also developed a poetry as intricate as that of their contemporaries the Homeric Greeks, and probably more self-reflexive. Ancient Tamil had epics that rivalled the *Iliad*, and a metaphysical culture more appealing than that of the Socratics, a notion of 'truth', which Shulman describes as 'largely non-cognitive or supra-epistemic, a personal, individual matter, not readily generalised, linked to the interior and to breath.' The mythology began in the 19th century, when Shulman notes a 'spooky synchronicity': Tamil nationalism developed at around the same time the Sangam classics of Ancient Tamil were first brought into print. What is most astonishing about the Tamil renaissance was that it began, according to Shulman's estimate, a century after the last great Tamil epics had disappeared from the oral tradition. It was as if the early modern Athenians had forgotten how to sing their epics and then, a hundred years later, suddenly had them back in books with commentaries. All of this fed early Tamil nationalism at the start of the 20th century, and culminated in the anti-Hindi riots of the 1960s in Tamil Nadu. Yet Prabhakaran and his disciples made little use of this storehouse of foundation myths and utopian imaginaries. Prabhakaran made his public pronouncements in conversational Tamil, not the 'high' Tamil that Shulman thinks so finely suited to the grand undertakings of a powerful state or a romantic heart. But in the end perhaps the fate of the Tigers would have been no different if they had had an intellectual leader – a Ze'ev Jabotinsky or an Adamantios Korais – rather than an addict of Hollywood.

Part conventional army, part mafia, part multinational corporation, the LTTE took full advantage of globalisation. They were partly funded by vast donations from the diaspora, as well as by the extortion of shops and companies in the Tamil communities of Toronto, London, Paris, New York, Berlin, Dhaka and elsewhere. Kumaran Pathmanathan presided over one of the most extensive arms-trafficking networks of the 1980s, receiving hardware and guns from the Soviet Bloc, North Korea, the Thai military and the Khmer Rouge. US-made Stinger missiles were acquired via the Afghan Mujahideen; the Sea Tigers hijacked major arms shipments intended for the SLA, including seventy thousand mortar shells supplied by Israel via Zimbabwe. By the end of the 1980s, the LTTE had a fleet of ships and at least two submarines, as well as the light aircraft it used to bomb Colombo. The steady influx of money and matériel contributed to the Tigers' sense of self-reliance and provided the means for economic autarky, but it came at a price. Prabhakaran took a passing interest in the state formations of Eritrea and Kosovo, but could not bring himself to harness international institutions in his favour. Unlike the Palestinian freedom fighters, the Tigers never cultivated popular support or public opinion around the world, which meant that few people knew who they were or what they were fighting for. Only a handful of human rights agencies were concerned about Tamils by the end of the conflict. Unlike the Maoist insurgents in Nepal in the same period, the LTTE cadres gradually isolated themselves from the local Tamil population and became a conventional army that dragged civilians around with it, rather than a guerrilla force made up of civilians. When their luck finally ran out in the late 2000s, the Tigers' forced conscription policy made ordinary Tamils, who worked for them as labourers and human shields, more likely to abandon the LTTE.

The decisive factor in the LTTE-Sri Lankan civil war was India. In 1987, the SLA had by most accounts been close to delivering a major blow to the Tigers, in a siege of Jaffna town, when the Indian military began supporting them with airdrops and calling for a ceasefire. The SLA had no choice but to submit to a settlement brokered by its more powerful neighbour. The terms of the ceasefire were generous towards the LTTE: they included recognition of Tamil as an official language, as well as de facto recognition of the Tigers' state in the form of a new federal union that would join the Northern and Eastern Provinces, making the Tamils a formidable force in the island's politics. But when the Indian Peace Keeping Force was

deployed to disarm the Tigers, as per the terms of the peace accord, the LTTE reneged and engaged the Indian forces. The SLA's enemies were suddenly squaring up to each other. After losing more than 1500 troops, India finally decided to withdraw and support the SLA against its own proxy-gone-rogue.

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From one perspective, the rejection of the Indian-brokered peace was the beginning of a process of self-destruction that was ensured by Prabhakaran's decision, which he kept secret from most of his associates, to assassinate the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 – an act that turned many sympathetic Tamils in India against the cause. But this view perhaps misunderstands Prabhakaran. Along with his inner circle, he was averse to any form of compromise with the Sri Lankan state. For one thing, it was impossible to talk of federal compromise with the parents of Tamil children who had strapped on suicide vests and killed themselves for Eelam. Once Karuna had defected, and with him much of the LTTE-held Eastern Province, Prabhakaran completed the LTTE's self-annihilation by boycotting the 2005 Sri Lankan election, thereby guaranteeing that the Sinhala chauvinist Mahinda Rajapaksa came to power. This was the outcome Prabhakaran wanted: an OK Corral-style showdown. In Rajapaksa's brother, the defence minister Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, he found a partner willing to play it out with him.

Mahinda Rajapaksa was the first Sri Lankan leader not to come from the heart of the political establishment. He and Gotabhaya grew up in a political family of modest means in the southern commercial hub of Matara. Mahinda followed his father into Bandaranaike's SLFP, becoming the youngest representative in the country. Gotabhaya entered the military and received advanced infantry training at Fort Benning in Georgia. In the 1980s, he made his name fighting the latest incarnation of the JVP – 'the White Terror' – in the south, as well as the growing LTTE insurgency in the north. After overseeing the destruction of a JVP guerrilla cadre in Sooriyakanda, which left three hundred schoolchildren dead, Gotabhaya felt under threat and sent his family to live with his wife's relatives in California, where he later joined them, working at a 7-Eleven before taking up a second career as a Unix systems administrator at a local law school. He became an American citizen in 1998.

Gotabhaya watched in despair from Los Angeles as the LTTE routed Sri Lankan forces at Jaffna and Elephant Pass. In 2005, he returned to work on his brother's campaign and became defence minister when Mahinda was elected. The United States Pacific Command had told the Sri Lankan government in 2002 that the war against the Tigers would be winnable if the correct counter-insurgency strategy were implemented, and the right weapons bought. 'Cluster bomb units should be purchased for unarmoured area targets,' the report reads. 'Buying two MiG-27s will drain resources that could be used to maintain, arm and upgrade the Kfirs.' 'I don't know if anyone in government at the time read that report,' Gotabhaya told me at his house in Colombo, 'but I took it very seriously. I followed almost all of the recommendations, with only a few exceptions. I didn't buy more Kfir fighters from Israel like they wanted, but got MiGs from Ukraine instead.' Together the Rajapaksas quadrupled the size of the SLA and expanded its bases in the north. Forces that had been lost were immediately replenished, and instead of single front lines, several fronts were set up one behind the other so that Tiger cadres that broke any one line would immediately encounter a new one. Gota's war was relentless, without the periods of retrenchment that had allowed the Tigers to regroup. 'I knew the UN and the human rights critics couldn't touch us,' Gotabhaya told me. 'The US made it clear they were on board. The key was India. Only India could stop us. So we shared everything with the Indians and developed trust.' (Wikileaks has revealed that when Gotabhaya and his chief general, Sarnath Fonseka, visited the US during the war, the US State Department had to protect them from the US Department of Homeland Security, which wanted to take them in for questioning about human rights abuses.) By January 2009, the SLA had recaptured most of the Tamil North and destroyed strongholds in the sun-scorched flatlands of the Vanni – Omanthi, Puliyanikulam and the onetime capital Kilinochchi. This involved the killing of hundreds of medical personnel and thousands of civilians. By May 2009, Eelam had been reduced to the size of a few football fields. At the Nanthikadal lagoon, in the far north-east, Prabhakaran was captured and killed. Photos of his execution and a gruesome video were widely disseminated. The SLA also took the precautionary measure of executing his 12-year-old son. The Tigers were over.

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Today, the Jaffna peninsula remains occupied territory. There are military bases all the way along the main road from Jaffna to Kilinochchi. The army has gone into business, running small farms and stores that flood the local market with goods and deflate the profits of Tamil businesses in the area. Jaffna Tamils often point to the Buddhist shrines inside the bases as signs of the Sinhala colonisation of the north, and there has been a lack of integration of Tamils into the military. The SLA's systematic destruction of the burial grounds of the Tiger dead contributes to their romanticisation by many Tamil youths. Outside Jaffna town, I watched a group of young boys play-act battle scenes from the war with sticks and machetes. Several younger Tamils in Jaffna spoke to me longingly about the LTTE, even its culture of sexual abstemiousness. The imam at the newly reconstructed Jumma mosque in Jaffna explained to me that after several massacres and the forced takeover of Muslim shops by the LTTE, he had no choice but to accept Arab money for rebuilding the community – even though the Arab influence provokes the nationalism and xenophobia of hardline Buddhists and former Tigers, whose attacks against Muslims are becoming more frequent.

The Sri Lankan state's rehabilitation and re-education programme for former LTTE fighters appears to be, in large part, an attempt to hide the number of dead civilians by inflating the number of 're-educated' Tigers, many of whom were simply civilians the Tigers used for protection and labour at the end of the war. The Sri Lankan government's efforts to demystify the Tamil leadership have had mixed success. 'We wanted to avoid making martyrs,' an SLA general in Kilinochchi told me. The LTTE's former number two, Karuna, was sworn in as 'Integration Minister' after the Tigers' defeat. At a military base on the outskirts of Kilinochchi, I found Kumaaran Pathmanathan – now a courtly elder in a bright madras shirt – sitting in the orphanage that he operates while under house arrest. He was surrounded by some of the adoring faithful from the Tamil diaspora who'd come to visit him. It's been trickier to prevent the martyrdom of Prabhakaran, whose childhood home, though thoroughly levelled, remains a site of pilgrimage for Tamils and Sinhalese alike.

For the Tamil diaspora, the implosion of the Tigers spelled chaos. There was a string of murders in Toronto and Paris, probably carried out by LTTE operatives against each other in a battle for control of the group's financial assets. The outcome of these struggles, and the current status of the donation and extortion network, remains murky. The wealthy Tamil professionals who became financial backers of the Tigers are the most unrepentant about its brutality. The political wing of the diaspora has formally split with the more moderate Global Tamil Forum led by Reverend S.J. Emmanuel in London, and the more radical Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) led by Visvanathan Rudrakumaran in New York. Rudrakumaran's headquarters are at his law office in Manhattan. He has dedicated his life to getting the destruction of the LTTE declared a genocide by the United Nations, part of a strategy for gaining statehood. But his attempt to internationalise the struggle for Eelam appears to have come too late. At a TGTE meeting I attended in a ballroom of the New York Bar Association, the two dozen Tamils who attended seemed weighed down by a sense of duty. A photo of Prabhakaran was positioned between engravings of Lincoln and Chester Arthur. After a few words from Rudrakumaran, the former US attorney general Ramsey Clark rambled on about world peace from beneath a Tiger flag emblazoned with criss-crossed AK-47s.

The Rajapaksa years now look like the most ignominious period in the country's post-independence history. The government squandered the huge amount of political capital it acquired by defeating the Tigers in a series of corruption scandals. (The alleged shady dealings over the MiGs was the major news story while I was in Sri Lanka; now it's the alleged torture and murder of a Sri Lankan rugby star who played on the same team as Mahinda's son.) As president, Sirisena hasn't had to say much about the Rajapaksas' corruption; Mahinda's sumptuous houses and fleets of Lamborghinis have done the job for him. But Sirisena remains wary of reforming or scaling back the military, which still pays fealty to the family that enriched its officer class and so dramatically increased the number of soldiers. Building up the army wasn't the only thing Gotabhaya Rajapaksa did, however. His time in the West also sparked his interest in urban development. When he wasn't fighting the Tigers, he was managing a massive slum-clearance scheme that has transformed Colombo into a city of antiseptic beauty. The rest of the Rajapaksa revamp continues apace: shopping malls occupy sleepy old colonial buildings, and Buddhist gated communities have popped up on Colombo's outskirts. The days of the Galle Face Green, the last public space where people congregate freely in the city, may well be numbered.

The Sri Lankan press was wrecked during the Rajapaksa years. When an editor of one of the last independent newspapers called Gotabhaya to confirm whether he had reserved a seat on a government flight for one of his Polish hounds, threats were made and she fled the country. Since the end of the war, a new generation of Tamil-speaking Indian journalists have begun to examine the war's aftermath with a renewed sense of awe at the scale of the implosion. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, the young Indian writer Rohini Mohan offers a fine-grained account of the Rajapaksa years. Her narrative interweaves the fates of two former LTTE fighters, and one of their mothers, as they navigate their way through postwar Sri Lanka. She enters the minds of her subjects with care, never presuming to know more about her subjects than they know themselves. She also never allows her portraits of people to obstruct the larger story, as she documents the continuities and ruptures between civil war and peace: the tortures that continue in Sri Lanka's prisons, the reviling of former LTTE female fighters by those who once cheered them on, the rising animus towards Muslims, and a new economic regime which, in its pursuit of foreign investment, has caused the stagnation of real wages. Human rights workers often appear as guardian angels in *The Seasons of Trouble*, and so they were for many of the thousands of Tamils and Sinhalese picked up by Sri Lankan security forces and jailed without trial.

The major problem for Sri Lanka now is a version of the challenge faced by Germany in 1990: how can enemy sectors be reintegrated into the national economy? The investment projects in Jaffna town have created a new wave of entrepreneurship, but unemployment has risen in the countryside. In the middle of the country, the squalid condition of 'Indian' Tamils on the tea estates hasn't much improved since the days when they were Lipton's serfs. Their infant mortality rate is double that in the rest of the population, and they earn about half what manual labourers are paid outside the plantations. Meanwhile, the South is being sold as an island paradise for tourists in search of pygmy blue whales, tsunami trinkets and time in the sun.

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Letters

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There are a number of mistakes in Thomas Meaney's piece on Sri Lanka (*LRB*, 2 February). He writes, for example, that the British 'converted Ceylon's inhabitants on a much larger scale than the Portuguese and Dutch had', yet there were four times as many Catholics as Protestants in the population when the country gained its independence in 1948. The Citizenship Act of that year stripped huge numbers of Indian Tamil estate workers of their citizenship: it did not 'assign greater value' to Sinhalese votes. Meaney asserts that most support for 'Sinhala ethnic nationalism' has come not from 'Buddhist fundamentalists on the political right, but from elements originating on the communist left': in fact, the key figures in post-independence Buddhist nationalism, like Walpola Rahula, were Buddhist nationalists closely aligned with political parties on the left. 'Buddhist' and 'left' are not alternatives in this political cosmology.

I'm not sure who would be more offended by the suggestion that S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was a member of something called the 'burgher class': the Eurasian Burghers, many of whom left for Australia as a result of Bandaranaike's language policies, or Bandaranaike himself, a man from the highest caste in Sinhala society. The 'fifty thousand youths' who 'descended on Colombo' in 1971 are new to me, and I imagine to all other scholars of modern Sri Lankan politics. The economy didn't 'worsen' under Jayewardene's government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, unless annual growth rates of 5 per cent and more are taken as 'worsening'.

Jonathan Spencer
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Thomas Meaney writes: I thank Jonathan Spencer for clearing up errors for which I have only myself to blame. But some of his objections are unnecessary. Of course the Citizenship Act of 1948, along with the two follow-up Acts of 1949, stripped Indian Tamil workers of their citizenship: I say as much in the piece. But, as Janice Jiggins has shown, by continuing to be allocated parliamentary seats based on the total population and area of the Kandyan highlands, where the workers lived with a smaller number of

Sinhalese, the up-country Sinhalese exercised greater voting power than citizens did elsewhere, making them, in K.M. de Silva's words, 'the arbiter of the country's politics'. I did not say that 'Buddhist' and 'left' were mutually exclusive, merely that the main stimulus of Sinhala nationalism in the 1970s was the need for the government to respond to the concerns of the JVP, a leftist movement. Finally, while it is true that Sri Lanka's GDP did not suffer under Jayewardene's watch, income disparity and other negative factors increased.