

INTRODUCTION



Every LTTE cadre wanted to go to war, to fight. It was our dream.

—Kathiravan, former LTTE fighter

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were founded in 1972 with the aim of achieving independence for the north-eastern regions of Sri Lanka.¹ These territories were home to the Tamil minority, which had been subject to various discriminations by the government, dominated by the Sinhala majority, since the country gained independence in 1948. By the early 1990s, the LTTE had taken control of a significant portion of this territory. Having established a quasi-state that aimed to replicate the institutions of a nation-state, they began to exert political, military, economic and cultural hegemony over Tamil society, both in Sri Lanka and within the diaspora. Forming an army based on a relatively small number of fighters, but highly trained and deeply motivated, the LTTE managed to put the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) under considerable strain. By the 1990s, they were regarded by military analysts as one of the most effective non-state armies of the late twentieth century.

However, after the failure of peace talks with the government (2002–6) and the resumption of military operations in 2006, the balance of power shifted in favour of the SLA. By successfully isolating the LTTE diplomatically, logistically and economically, and increasing the size of the army from 100,000 to 300,000 personnel (Hashim 2013: 187–88), Mahinda Rajapaksa, elected President of the Republic in 2005, managed to defeat an organization that once seemed nearly impossible to eradicate. In 2007, the SLA regained all eastern areas previously controlled

The Afterlives of Tamil Tigers

Fighters' Memories of War and Survival

Giacomo Mantovan

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Not for Resale

by the LTTE. The following year, it launched a final offensive to capture the Vanni region in the north, where the LTTE found themselves besieged. By the end of that year, the LTTE had lost the critical military capabilities needed for defence, yet they chose to fight to the end rather than surrender. On 18 May 2009, in their final defeat, the LTTE leaders were killed, and the organization was dismantled. This conclusion came at a staggering human cost: in the final five months of the war alone, it is estimated that between 40,000 and 70,000 Tamil civilians were killed (UN 2011; Harrison 2013: 236).

In April 2011, I met Raj, a veteran and survivor of the ‘last fights’ (as former LTTE members refer to the final months of the war) who had recently arrived in France. At first, our conversation was difficult. Raj was somewhat distrustful and hesitant to say anything that might reflect poorly on the LTTE. He stated that he had joined voluntarily, fully convinced of the righteousness of the LTTE’s cause. He expressed his total and sincere dedication to the movement, although he did not elaborate on the reasons behind his commitment. After about an hour, Raj became more talkative and opened up further. He recounted what had happened during the final year of the war. In April 2008, three shells exploded near him, leaving him injured in several parts of his body: his back, a leg and his abdomen (his intestines spilling out). He was evacuated to an LTTE field hospital, where he underwent surgery. The surgeon prescribed six months of complete rest. However, after just three months of convalescence, aware of the deteriorating situation for his side in the war, Raj decided to return to the front. In 2009, during the final phase of the war, when the Tigers and the civilians who had ‘followed’ them were completely encircled, his father was killed by a shell, his mother was wounded, and Raj himself was hit in the shoulder by a white phosphorus bomb. Despite this new injury, he continued to fight until the end. After spending a week in the camps set up by the government for survivors, Raj, fearing recognition and arrest, bribed military personnel (using his sisters’ jewellery) and managed to escape.

In Raj’s words, it becomes clear that what troubles him the most is the collapse of the LTTE, the struggle to which he devoted his entire life and the collective entity to which he felt indissolubly bound. It is the humiliation of being left without food or water, of having to drink rain-water collected in puddles. It is the transition from playing a role in a momentous historical event to becoming an anonymous asylum seeker. And it is the fact that he has become disabled. Showing me a long and frightening scar on his abdomen, he told me that he still has three shell fragments lodged in his body. Parisian doctors refuse to remove them because of their proximity to vital organs.

Yet, at the end of our conversation, Raj stated that, despite everything that had happened, if the LTTE were to entrust him with a mission today, he would not hesitate to carry it out. Like all LTTE fighters, Raj experienced injuries, punishments, total obedience to superiors, the inability to speak freely, separation from his family, the absence of a salary and, ultimately, the annihilation of the LTTE. Nevertheless, every former fighter I met emphasized one point: they were completely loyal and gave everything for the LTTE, which they believed waged a just war for the independence of an oppressed minority. Despite the tragic final outcome, none of them told me they ever regretted their decision to join. How did the LTTE manage to produce men and women so motivated and determined, willing to kill and die to achieve their goals? How is the self of a fighter constructed? On what premises does one base their decision to join or refuse to serve in a revolutionary and totalitarian organization?

The Production of New Men and Women

The LTTE represented itself as a revolutionary army for national liberation, dedicated to establishing an independent state. In their view, this was the only viable way to protect the Tamil people from the violence and discrimination of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. However, it is noteworthy that the LTTE focused their policies of social and political transformation more on their own members than on the broader Tamil community (Thiranagama 2011, 2014a). As an army, all LTTE members – men and women alike – underwent extensive and rigorous military training. Their lives began on the battlefield, and during their time in the movement, they remained fighters (*Poorali*), even if, in some cases, they also carried out tasks typically assigned to civilians in other contexts. The LTTE's training camps were not merely spaces for teaching combat skills; they were designed to transform recruits into new men and women. Joining the LTTE, therefore, involved a profound reshaping of oneself, one's worldview and one's sense of belonging.

The aspiration of revolutionary movements to transform individuals is not a new phenomenon. The foundations of the idea of a revolutionary regeneration of both the individual and the social body were laid during the French Revolution (Ozouf 1989: 116–57 cited by Grojean 2008a: 1). After the First World War, this idea spread across Europe and was partially implemented by the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy (Grojean 2008a). Since then, it has inspired so many states and political or religious movements around the world that it would be difficult

to enumerate them all (Grojean 2008a). Ethnographies on non-state armies show that militancy involves far more than pursuing a political goal or learning how to fight: it profoundly impacts the identity and subjectivity of fighters and contributes to the creation of a new community (Feldman 1991; Mahmood 1996; Aretxaga 1997; Hoffman 2011; Gayer 2012; Montoya 2012; Viterna 2013; Pudal 2018).

Within the LTTE, this process of transformation was primarily carried out during military training, where the organization shaped the desires and emotions of recruits to create the fighters it needed (see chapter 2). However, the transformation of individuals and the creation of a new collective identity began even before military training and continued throughout the period of service in the LTTE, which typically lasted just over a decade. Indeed, even before deciding to join the LTTE, young Tamils were influenced by the narratives and mobilization efforts of the LTTE and other Tamil revolutionary movements (active primarily in the 1980s) fighting for independence. The bloody repression by the Sri Lankan government also played a significant role in shaping young people's desire to join the armed struggle. Before the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 (a date commonly regarded as the beginning of the Sri Lankan civil war), very few Tamils were willing to take part in the armed struggle. However, in the months following the pogrom, several hundred young people joined armed groups (Daniel 1996). Once new LTTE members completed their military training, they continued to strengthen their fighter identities: militancy and war reinforced bonds of camaraderie and brotherhood. The sense of belonging to a military organization – which became a new family – and the shared collective experiences had a profound impact on the self-construction process.

To properly contextualize the changes experienced by fighters, it is essential to understand that war is not only destructive but also a space for transformation. For a long time, war was analysed by social sciences and humanitarian policies as an event that suspends and destroys social relationships, with a focus on how violence is organized and how people cope with it. However, this approach overlooks the social changes that occur during war. To avoid this pitfall, I will analyse civil war as a 'social condition', a concept proposed by Stephen Lubkemann in the following terms: "The "war" that I examine here is not the violent military contest for political power. Rather, it is the complex reconfiguration of social, economic, cultural, and political conditions that warscape inhabitants confront and contend with in plotting and implementing their everyday social existence – in other words, "war as a social condition" (Lubkemann 2008: 15). Rather than focusing solely on the ruptures and

destabilization caused by war in the social world, this concept seeks to highlight how war amplifies and multiplies certain pre-existing forms of social conflict. In fact, the social fragility brought about by war often also entails a reorganization of the social field in which conflicts take on new forms (Lubkemann 2008: 23). In other words, war is a complex 'social condition' that transforms pre-existing social relationships and gives rise to significant changes in social life:

It examines how violence contributes in complex ways to the reconfiguration of social opportunity structures and the restructuring of social decision making, recognizing that more often than not violence in any given context will generate both new challenges *and* possibilities, new forms of empowerment *and* disempowerment, and affirmations *and* underminings of identity – in different ways for different actors.² (Lubkemann 2008: 23–24)

Following the idea that war and militancy are conceived as spaces of transformation leading to the emergence of new collectivities and individualities (Thiranagama 2011), this study seeks to explore the experience and self-construction of LTTE fighters. The aim is to understand, on one hand, how a revolutionary organization attempts to shape its members, and on the other, the impact this self-making process has on the fighters' life trajectories, particularly regarding their experience of war and militancy (and later, exile), their ways of thinking, acting, perceiving and feeling. As we will see, militancy within the LTTE and the experience of war do not merely shape the mental categories and shared representations of the fighters; they are also deeply inscribed in their bodies and emotions. This analysis focuses on how the body and emotions intersect with the lived and embodied history of individuals (Fassin 2002, 2006) and the culturally constructed history created by the LTTE (chapters 3 and 4).

To address these questions, I will follow the life trajectories of fighters and the fundamental elements that structure their experience: military training, where they learn to respect discipline and hierarchy, forge bonds of camaraderie and shape their bodies for soldiering; nationalist narratives and political rituals that glorify heroes and honour their sacrifices, with these heroes becoming the model that fighters aspire to emulate; combat, which constitutes an existential experience; injuries and – less frequently – torture and detention; the suffering caused by the death of comrades; and finally, defeat, disengagement and exile.

The study of fighters' trajectories, particularly during the period of military training, highlights the close and profound relationship between the individual and the institution, and how the latter shapes

adolescents by structuring their desires, political aspirations, and perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Since the seminal works of Foucault and Goffman, it has been well established that disciplinary societies and total institutions, such as barracks, prisons and asylums, aim to transform individuals (Foucault 1993 [1975]), dictating what they must do and why, and determining everything they are allowed to be (Goffman 1961: 180).

Rather than treating the LTTE as a total institution in Goffman's sense, it is more heuristic to conceive of it as a 'greedy institution' – a type of institution typically associated with political or religious groups (Cosser 1973, 1974). Unlike asylums, which isolate individuals entirely from the outside world, the LTTE preserved a certain degree of openness and, in most cases, relied on voluntary participation – with the exception of the final years of the war – even though coercive elements were undeniably present.³

While in the modern world people may have obligations and allegiances towards multiple institutions and groups (family, faith communities, associations, etc.), greedy institutions 'claim exclusive and undivided loyalty and seek to negate the claims of competing status positions on those they wish to draw within their circle. Their demands on the person are omnivorous' (Cosser 1973: 111). Such institutions require total adherence from their members, seeking to absorb their entire person through complete obedience and total commitment (Cosser 1973: 112, 1974: 4). Rather than relying solely on coercion, greedy institutions work to cultivate internal consent: they 'aim at maximising assent to their styles of life by appearing highly desirable to the participants' (Cosser 1974: 6). They offer various benefits to their members, such as access to religious or historical truths, membership in a group of enlightened individuals or chosen ones, enhanced social prestige, or becoming part of a new 'family'. As we shall see, membership in the LTTE also offered its own benefits, although these were more symbolic and social than material. Saba Mahmood poses a crucial question for analysing the link between power, subjectivity and freedom: 'How do we analyze operations of power that construct different kinds of bodies, knowledge, and subjectivities whose trajectoiries do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics?' (Mahmood 2005: 14).

As I have already mentioned, LTTE fighters illustrate a condition that might appear paradoxical: on the one hand, they submit to the authority of their leader and to the power of the LTTE, yet on the other hand, this submission is willingly accepted and not perceived negatively – quite the opposite, in fact. 'Without rules, there is no freedom', Nirujah, a veteran, told me. To fully grasp this complex condition, we must avoid

analysing it through the lens of liberal thought, according to which individuals are assumed naturally to seek freedom, conceived primarily as individual liberty in Euro-American societies (Mahmood 2005: 5). In his studies conducted in South Africa, James Ferguson (2013) has shown that poor people do not necessarily attempt to escape relations of dependence in pursuit of individual freedom; rather, they often actively strive to enter into such relations. In South African society, hierarchical affiliations create more opportunities – both in terms of employment and social integration – whereas individual freedom frequently leads to exclusion. In these contexts, hierarchical relationships and obligations do not diminish or constrain the attainment of full personhood, but rather constituted and enabled it (Ferguson 2013: 226).

Thus, this voluntary subjection makes it possible to break away from a previous identity and subordinate status, creating a new subjectivity which does not move towards individualism, but rather takes shape within the sociality of a particular group (Audrain 2004: 161). The LTTE, like other greedy institutions – such as the People’s Liberation Army in Nepal, analysed by Laurent Gayer (2014) – produce the paradox of ‘subjectivation’ proposed by Foucault, in which the very same processes and conditions that produce the subject’s subordination are also those through which the subject becomes aware of themselves and of their identity (Foucault 1993 [1975], 2001). Indeed, according to Foucault, consciousness does not precede power relations but is itself constituted by them. Subjects are therefore formed through practical and moral injunctions, arising within specific historical contexts, which Foucault calls ‘modes of subjectivation’ (Foucault 1993 [1975], 2001). As Mahmood further argues, norms are not simply imposed from the outside but constitute the very substance of a subject’s inner life (Mahmood 2005: 23).

The relationships that bind individuals to groups and institutions evolve based on the historical development of a social movement. According to the sociological theory of Francesco Alberoni (2014), collective movements arise from a process known as the ‘nascent state’, characterized by a surge of energy and enthusiasm that transforms the surrounding society. A nascent state emerges from the powerful formation of solidarity, which breaks previously established social ties and creates a new collective, a new identity and new life projects (Alberoni 2014: 13). However, this stage cannot last indefinitely and leads to one of two outcomes: institutionalization or dissolution. As a result, according to this theory, when a movement mobilizes hundreds of armed and trained fighters, it has already begun its process of institutionalization. From their creation in 1972 until 1983, the LTTE remained in such a

nascent state, consisting of only a few dozen members. After the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, however, the movement saw hundreds of new recruits, and Indian Intelligence Services began training the LTTE (alongside four other Tamil armed groups) in southern India (Swamy 2008 [1994]): the process of institutionalization was underway. By 1991, the LTTE had taken control of the Jaffna Peninsula and the Vanni region in northern Sri Lanka. At this stage, they initiated the creation of state-like institutions and sovereignty, establishing a judiciary system, a central bank, a police force and an army (Stokke 2006; Klem and Maunaguru 2017).

Once committed to the LTTE, fighters were willing to do anything, including sacrificing themselves, for the LTTE and for national liberation (Cutantiram). Having dedicated their existence to the construction of the Tamil nation (Tamil Eelam) and submitted themselves to the LTTE's rules, their lives found meaning within the broader *framework of nation-building* (Schalk 1997b; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005). Throughout this work, I aim to demonstrate that the lives of fighters, their individuality and their sense of belonging to a group can only be fully understood in connection with the LTTE.

The research proposed here, which examines a process of self-construction within an authoritarian organization, aims, among other objectives, to contribute to the debate on adherence to or resistance against an authoritarian regime (Yurchak 2003; Holbraad 2014; Amarasuriya et al. 2020). More specifically, it seeks to analyse how an institution attempts to shape individuals' subjectivities and construct a new community by combining methods of persuasion with coercive practices (Foucault 1993 [1975]; Grojean 2016). This will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the contrast typically drawn between will and coercion.

Fighters' Bodies and Emotions

Studies on the LTTE have primarily focused on a cultural analysis of nationalist narratives and political rituals (Roberts 1996; Schalk 1997a, 1997b; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005; Trawick 2007; Fuglerud 2011) rather than on embodied experiences. While these aspects are undoubtedly significant for the identity of the fighters, the LTTE did not transform recruits into combatants through the teaching of doctrines and political ideologies during military training (political courses were often not part of the training). Instead, this transformation was achieved through the process of controlling and shaping the recruits'

bodies. New recruits experienced the institution (i.e. the LTTE) through physical exercises, strict discipline and frequent punishments. In this regard, the body will be considered here as ‘the existential ground of culture’, serving as the starting point for understanding human engagement with a cultural world (Csordas 1993: 135). In other words, ‘bodies are highly adapted to co-opting culture into their corporeal repertoires in ways that colonize everyday practice’ (Higate 2017: 46).

However, in the case of fighters, embodied participation in the cultural world and the process of becoming new political subjects occur primarily through the power and violence of the institution that trains and dominates them (Feldman 1991; Foucault 1993 [1975]; Higate 2013; Teboul 2017; Açıksöz 2020). The body is, in fact, ‘the privileged site upon which the mark of power is inscribed’ (Fassin and d’Halluin 2005: 597). The question, then, is to observe and understand how a nationalist organization can produce new political subjectivities and a new collectivity by imposing power on the bodies of its fighters. The body produced is not a generic warrior’s body but reflects the cultural construction of LTTE militancy as a liberation struggle, where fighters are unafraid to die for their homeland and do not complain about being wounded or subjected to harsh discipline. Through physical exercises, strict rules and punishments, and the use of nationalist narratives, the LTTE shaped the bodily and emotional perceptions of their recruits, teaching them what they should and should not feel in specific circumstances.

The body is also the locus of emotions. Over the past two decades, social sciences have increasingly recognized the critical role emotions play in contexts of political activism, conflict and war. Militant organizations, non-state armies and political parties, aware of the influence of emotions on activism, often seek to harness them to reinforce their political actions. Firstly, emotions are exploited for their mobilizing potential (Blom and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2020). ‘Moral shocks’, suffering, and humiliations endured by a community or individual can become powerful drivers of mobilization when a militant organization frames them within a political project that offers the possibility of action aimed at restoring justice (Axel 2001; Larzillièrè 2018; Chua 2019). Secondly, militant organizations often go beyond using emotions to attract potential activists. Through ‘sensitising devices’ (Traïni and Siméant 2009), they aim to cultivate emotional repertoires designed to elicit emotions that are tactically appropriate for specific situations. These are described as ‘institutionally shaped emotions’ (Larzillièrè et al. 2021: 165).

In addition to examining the LTTE’s use of emotions and the impact of these policies on their fighters, I also propose to approach emotions as an analytical category capable of revealing how individuals perceive social

relationships. From this perspective, emotions provide insight not only into the actor's social situation but also into how he judges and makes sense of it (Larzilli re et al. 2021: 165). For example, the joy a fighter expresses when recounting his meeting with leader Prabhakaran, or the enthusiasm following a battlefield victory, reflects a nostalgia for an event, now irreversibly concluded, that represented a source of hope and pride. Conversely, the sadness and bitterness of a fighter who survived the 2009 massacre, endured imprisonment and torture, and receives no social recognition for their past, not only reveal how this person feels and interprets their past but also shed light on their broader social relationships and their place in society. In other words, emotions provide a window through which we can observe the social role played by fighters. This perspective allows us to distinguish the different ways a fighter relates to the world – whether during the LTTE's period of expansion and growth or, conversely, during its final decline and defeat, when the LTTE became a vanquished force.

The Narration of the Self, Between Memory and Nostalgia

'Yes,' he said, as if inspired, 'I will tell you my story. Perhaps I shall understand it all better when I can, at last, give words to it'.

—Karen Blixen, *Seven Gothic Tales*

In studying life narratives, it is crucial to analyse the interaction between the narrator and their audience: because one always speaks to someone, narratives shift depending on the audience (Crapanzano 1984, 1985 [1980]; Abu-Lughod 1993; Jackson 2006 [2002]; Portelli 2007). Several philosophers have shown that the self is always in relation to a public sphere, societal norms and other human beings (Taylor 1989; Arendt 1998 [1958]; Foucault 2008; Cavarero 2009 [1997]).

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt offers a brilliant theoretical framework that helps us develop an analysis of the production of the political subject and intersubjective relations in narration. The self and the Freudian ego are not natural realities; they are social constructions specific to the history of the Western world. Nevertheless, they constitute our truth (Rose 1998: 2–4). Modern philosophy, since Descartes, has shifted its focus from the world itself to the individual, from the public to the private, from the objectivity of appearance to the interiority of the subject (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 224; Cavarero 2009 [1997]: 59).

According to Arendt, in fact, modern men and women have been alienated from the external world and cast back upon themselves (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 224). Reversing this perspective, the German philosopher conceives of a relational self that takes a concrete form only when it appears in public and opens itself to the Other:

Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling [...] (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 58)

The Arendtian conception of social life is rooted in the shared dimensions of living and acting: bound together by a condition of plurality, men and women exist in relation to one another. Every human being is unique, and it is through action and speech that each individual's singularity is revealed (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 157). Possessing the power to disclose the agent, action and speech – directed towards other humans – make visible and audible in the world who the agent of speech and action is (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 159–65). The agent can therefore express their uniqueness only by speaking and acting in public, by telling their story.

According to Arendt, life narratives reveal *who* a person is, not *what* they are; in her view, 'the art of storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it' (Arendt 2006 [1974]: 134). However, while a life story discloses the *who*, once we attempt to articulate who someone is, our vocabulary and categories compel us to describe what they are (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 134). Indeed, upon entering the public sphere, the *who* is handed over to others: its very existence depends on them. To present oneself to others does not mean exposing one's interiority or the intimate truth of the subject. On the contrary, it means bringing to life a *self* that, before emerging from the obscurity of inner life, did not exist: it is the luminosity of the public sphere that grants it a concrete form.

The realm of 'human affairs' is a relational space, a network of plural relationships and rapports, where words are directed towards others; this space is 'something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent' (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 162–63).⁴ The revelation of the *who* is always embedded in

a ‘already existing web of human relationships’, which is why the narrator of a life story is never the sole author of their own story: the narrator and the agent never have complete control over their narrative (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 163).

Life narratives, as a way of transforming private life into an object with public significance (Arendt 1998 [1958]; Jackson 2006 [2002]), require individuals to recount their experiences and thus become subjects in a public space. In doing so, they use the cultural resources available to them and negotiate with their audience what to disclose or withhold – essentially shaping the subject they present themselves as. Indeed, when past experiences are narrated, they are transformed, re-enacted, reworked and reconstructed within intersubjective interactions (Jackson 2006 [2002]: 23), embedding themselves in the social context that demands the existence of such a life story.

The ‘already existing web of human relationships’ is the key element in understanding how life narratives are constructed. Since the pioneering work of Halbwachs (1980 [1950], 1994 [1925]), we know that memory is a reconstruction of the past that, starting from the present, depends on the social environment and collective representations. In other words, it is the collective that stimulates individual memories; the individual remembers by drawing from the ‘social frameworks’ present within their group (Halbwachs 1994 [1925]). These frameworks serve as reference points for a group, helping individuals make sense of their surroundings and reconstruct the past. They provide a worldview capable of unifying the narrative, given that memory, like identity, is inherently narrative (Ricoeur 1984). The social environment – and the changes within it – is fundamental to the elaboration of memories: ‘The succession of our remembrances, of even our most personal ones, is always explained by changes occurring in our relationships to various collective milieus – in short, by the transformations these milieus undergo separately and as a whole’ (Halbwachs 1980 [1950]: 49).

In analysing this reconstruction of the past, it is essential to consider the effects of group belonging on the production of individual memories (Lavabre 1994: 18), particularly when dealing with militant organizations that produce narratives and partisan histories aimed at teaching members their worldview (and thus their perception of the past) (Lavabre 1994: 18). However, one should not assume that individual memories are merely a reflection of a collective memory produced by a militant organization (Lavabre 1994: 19). Individuals, within their belonging to a community, occupy different positions and roles in the group; collective memory is therefore ‘the memory of an organization, an articulation, a system of relationships between individuals’ (Bastide

1970: 92 cited by Lavabre 1994: 29). Attention should then focus on ‘the sensitive channels of transmission, on relationships, and, as Marc Bloch suggested, on the “facts of communication” between individuals within the group’ (Lavabre 1994: 19).

The former LTTE fighters I met were at a stage in their lives where their circumstances inevitably influenced how they constructed their memories and narratives. As defeated combatants, they received no social recognition for their past. The LTTE was included on the list of terrorist organizations by the European Union (from 2006 to 2014), the United States and India. Today, within the Tamil community in France, martyrs are venerated, but, as we will see in [chapter 5](#), no credit is given to surviving fighters. Fearing that revealing their past might cause problems or simply lead to social disapproval, these veterans choose not to share their stories with their compatriots. Many of the former LTTE fighters I interviewed had been granted asylum in France, secured housing and employment, and succeeded in forming families – in other words, they lived under acceptable conditions. However, this relatively ‘comfortable’ life (compared to their military experience), marked by anonymity and a lack of a specific purpose, did not fully satisfy them. Militancy in the LTTE, while demanding immense sacrifices and carrying significant risks, provided a certain level of social status, deep bonds of camaraderie and, above all, the sense of participating in the making of Tamil history – a history intended to lift Tamils out of their oppressed condition. Given the social circumstances my interlocutors face today, their life narratives are imbued with nostalgia, a sentiment that often defines the condition of exile (Said 2008).

According to Jankélévitch, nostalgia is a reaction against the irreversibility of time (Jankélévitch 2011 [1974]: 368). In the case of the former fighters, the irreversibility is twofold: that of the past time, and that of the LTTE, which has been destroyed. Their life stories do not describe nostalgia for their homeland, as is the case with exiled civilians, but rather for their life within the LTTE. This represents a reconstruction of the past, born from a sense of loss in the face of the irreversibility of time and an organization that, defeated, will never return.

The ‘resistance to the present’ characteristic of nostalgia, is, according to Karine Basset and Michèle Baussant, divided into two poles: ‘on the one hand, the projection of an elsewhere, a radically different otherness to be built, a utopia in the positive sense of a social imaginary “legitimately opposed to the existing state”; on the other, an idealisation of the past upon which the contestation of the present is anchored’ (Basset and Baussant 2018: 6). In the testimonies presented in this work, it is evident that, as Basset and Baussant (2018) observed, nostalgia is often

linked to utopia. Indeed, while the LTTE administered their territories with the aim of replicating the institutions of a nation-state, the longed-for Tamil nation (Tamil Eelam) had not yet been realized. To use the words of a former fighter, it was envisioned as a country ‘without social distinctions, without segregation, and without religious conflicts’. Veterans recall a past where they fought for a better future, a stark contrast to the ongoing injustices faced by Tamils and the absence of any prospect of independence. This idealization of the past does not deny the hardships and injustices experienced or, at times, perpetrated during the militancy – testimonies from fighters also mention human rights violations committed by the LTTE – but rather reflects the nostalgic manner in which these events are recounted. For instance, a former female fighter acknowledged that military recruits were frequently and harshly punished during training, yet she described this as something amusing and, above all, necessary for becoming a fighter.

This idealization of the past does not diminish the significance of the life narratives presented in this book; on the contrary, it is an integral part of the analysis. Nostalgia plays a crucial role in identity construction (Angé and Berliner 2015). It serves as a way to position oneself, to demonstrate the journey one has undertaken, to show that this journey was not made in isolation, but as part of a group (Rautenberg 2003: 19 cited by Basset and Baussant 2018). Telling one’s own story, whether recognizing oneself within a collective subject or not, reveals one’s place in the world – it is a negotiation of one’s relationship with others and with society. Rooted in existential needs, life narratives compel individuals to transform the world into one where, as individual subjects and members of a community, they feel they hold a significant role (Jackson 2006 [2002]: 30). In other words, nostalgic narrations are a way of positioning the self in a manner that allows the narrator to shape their subjectivity (Kojanic 2015: 206).

The numerous testimonies presented in this book are produced within an ‘intimate’ framework, unveiling the hidden face of the diaspora and militancy within the LTTE. These accounts stand in stark contrast to the public narratives often found in the extensive literature on activism and nationalism in the Tamil diaspora. The long-distance nationalist politics (Anderson 1998) promoted by pro-LTTE associations, aimed at mobilizing political and financial support from civilians, have disseminated a narrative portraying Tamils as a people oppressed by Sri Lankan authorities (McDowell 1996; Fuglerud 1999; Bruland 2011; Dequize 2011; Guyot 2021). Addressed to a population marked by significant differences in caste, class, gender and political affiliation, this narrative fostered a sense of shared history among Tamils in

the diaspora, contributing to the creation of a new collective identity (Thiranagama 2014a). However, this narrative targeted civilians, not fighters (Mantovan and Guyot 2023). As we will see in chapter 5, the relationships between LTTE veterans and activists in nationalist associations are cold, if not outright contentious, and former fighters generally refrain from participating in association activities; as such, the influence of these organizations on how combatants remember the past is negligible. For this reason, this book will not delve deeply into the politics of nationalist associations in the diaspora.

Ethics and Methods of a ‘Sensitive’ Fieldwork

This book is based on fieldwork conducted in the Île-de-France region (the Paris metropolitan area), which began in 2008 for my doctoral thesis at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales on the life stories of Tamil exiles and continued in the postdoctoral years, until 2023, with a focus more specifically on former LTTE fighters. I carried out participant observation in La Chapelle (the commercial and socializing area of the Tamils), in Hindu temples, and within various pro-LTTE nationalist associations, attending cultural and political events organized by these groups. I also attended the Great Heroes Day (*Maaveerar Naal*) in 2008, 2009 and 2016 in the Paris region, in 2019 in Jaffna (northern Sri Lanka) and in 2022 in London. As part of a study on asylum law, care for torture victims, and the suffering caused by the Sri Lankan civil war and exile, I conducted participant observation at the National Court of Asylum (CNDA) and the Medical Committee for Exiles (COMEDE); I also carried out dozens of interviews with Tamil victims and activists, asylum seekers, doctors, lawyers and protection officers from the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA). All this fieldwork helped me understand the social context of Tamil exiles’ lives in France, both civilians and former fighters. For the development of this book, most of the ethnographic material used comes from my meetings and interviews with former LTTE fighters.

The LTTE veterans form an extremely closed social group, with very restricted access. Without the help of Vimal, my key informant, it would have been impossible for me to carry out in-depth fieldwork on this population. I met Vimal in February 2008. Our shared interest in Tamil politics went hand in hand with mutual trust and a growing friendship. However, it took over a year for Vimal to trust me enough to tell me that he had many friends who were former fighters. Gradually, he introduced me to them, vouching for the fact that I was not a spy and

that I would respect their confidentiality and anonymity.⁵ Vimal was the perfect intermediary for this task: although he himself had never been a member of the LTTE, he had close friendships with several former fighters, who held him in high regard and trusted him. Being introduced by Vimal completely changed my relationship with my interlocutors: the suspicion and fear of an unknown person asking questions about sensitive topics, the negative attitudes I had encountered in the initial phase of my fieldwork, faded away.

Vimal studied philosophy and developed a more critical way of thinking: he accepts that the LTTE can be criticized, which contrasts strongly with the LTTE's intolerance towards dissenters. In 2015, when I asked him why he agreed to help me with my research, he outlined three reasons: firstly, because of his caste, he felt 'invisible' to others, so participating in my work was for him a way to gain visibility; secondly, he felt 'ignorant' due to his low caste status, his position as a minority member, and as an exile: in his family, education was seen as a path to emancipation and a fight against inequality, and he believed that my work could help him, as well as the Tamil community, to better understand the 'Tamil issue'; finally, he considered my approach 'more humane' than previous studies conducted in France, which, in his view, had been disrespectful towards the LTTE.

A few details regarding my interlocutors: all of them enlisted voluntarily when they were between thirteen and twenty years old, with the average age of enlistment being around fifteen and a half. All, except one, were from Jaffna. For the vast majority of them, enlistment occurred between 1987 and 2000, and they remained in the organization for more than ten years. Since my ethnographic data cannot cover the entire history of the LTTE (1972–2009), the focus here will be on former fighters who enlisted from 1987 onwards. This is the phase when the LTTE experienced rapid and significant growth in terms of personnel, military capabilities, economic power and influence. Therefore, the LTTE will be understood through the eyes of a generation that grew up during the war and knew the armed organization at its most powerful phase. As in any army, there were cases of desertion within the LTTE; I met only one deserter, so I do not have enough material to address this issue.

Some of my interlocutors arrived in France during the period of the peace talks (2002–6) between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Others remained in the ranks of the organization until the end of the war and were present during the final massacre in May 2009. I met many former fighters, but I only requested interviews with those I had already gained the trust of. I conducted one or more in-depth interviews – primarily about their life stories – with sixteen fighters, for a

total of twenty-six recorded interviews. There were also other, less formal conversations with veterans of the LTTE or other armed groups, as well as some diaspora activists, that were not recorded. Former female fighters are even more reluctant to share their testimonies than their male counterparts. As a result, I was able to meet only two of them. Although one of these two provided the life story to which I have dedicated the most space, this difficulty in accessing female testimonies has limited my possibility to address gender-related issues comprehensively. I have sufficient data to explore the topic of female militancy, but other subjects, such as sexuality and love, would require further empirical research to be addressed in greater depth.

With Vimal, my key informant, we had countless discussions, seven of which were recorded. Three interviews were also recorded with his father, Suresh. These in-depth conversations lasted, on average, from two to three hours; the shortest lasted about ninety minutes, and the longest lasted seven hours. The interviews were sometimes difficult, not only because it is always painful to talk about distressing events, but also because the activities of the LTTE were strictly secret. Trained to keep their secrets, fighters tend to be suspicious of everyone. Moreover, for my interlocutors, their secrets did not only concern information that might be of interest to Sri Lankan security forces, but also intimate memories, which they were therefore reluctant to share with an outsider. In this regard, Allen Feldman observes that for subaltern populations, secrets are constitutive of identity and cultural resistance (Feldman 1991: 11). On the other hand, secrets are always ‘in motion’ (Lovell 2007: 58), constantly made and undone (Adell 2014: 4). Thus, our conversations (between veterans and the researcher) were a kind of ongoing interaction where boundaries were both drawn and transgressed.

Moreover, some former fighters did not understand the importance of their testimony; as some explicitly told me, for them, having fought for a cause, what was the point of remembering painful things after having been defeated, knowing that these words could not change the outcome of the war?

Given the understandable difficulty, for the former LTTE fighters, of recounting their experiences, my primary goal was to get them to speak. I therefore made sure to conduct the interviews very cautiously; I tried to discern if there were subjects they wished to share with me; when I noticed reluctance to address a topic, I did not press. On the most sensitive topics, I made it clear that they could speak to me without fear of judgement, and again, I did not insist. Regarding the issue of human rights violations and the execution of dissenters, I approached these subjects with extreme caution; most often, I waited for the former

fighter to bring them up. A more direct approach would likely have had the opposite effect: the interlocutor would shut down, deny everything and the interview would fail. I fully share [Malkki's \(1995: 51\)](#) idea that an anthropologist should not be an investigator, but rather 'an attentive listener' who tries to understand what their interlocutors are willing to share.

[Robben \(1996\)](#) and [Hedlund \(2020: 31\)](#) have warned anthropologists against the 'ethnographic seduction' that researchers may feel when talking with perpetrators of human rights violations. However, I agree with the idea that this very 'ethnographic seduction' can be a path to improving our understanding ([Michelutti et al. 2018](#)). Showing empathy towards these men and women, and their pain, without passing judgement, was useful in establishing a fruitful ethnographic context.

Organization of the Book

The organization of this book follows the stages of the LTTE veteran's trajectory – from enlistment, training, combat, to defeat and exile – focusing on situations and episodes, such as military training, injuries, the death of comrades, which particularly shape experience and memory and, consequently, have a significant impact on the construction of the self and the subjectivity of the former fighters.

Before delving into the testimonies of former fighters, it is essential to explain the historical context that led to the birth of the LTTE. In [chapter 1](#), we will analyse the rise of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, the emergence of various revolutionary groups, which, with a socialist and independence-driven programme, led the new generations of the 1970s and, particularly, the 1980s, to take up arms in the fight for independence in the north and east of the island. The birth of the Tamil armed struggle is the result of both inter- and intra-community conflicts ([Daniel 1996](#)). Regarding the former, the rise of Sinhala nationalism, which sought to transform Sri Lanka into a fully Sinhala and Buddhist country, led, since the country's independence in 1948, to widespread discrimination against minorities; to riots against Tamils in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983; and to programmes of colonization in Tamil-majority regions. Regarding the latter, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, protests from low castes demanding an end to discrimination paved the way for the weakening of the Vellalar caste's dominance and for calls for social justice across Tamil society.

[Chapter 2](#) offers an analysis of how the LTTE, through military training, transformed young civilians, both boys and girls, into fighters. The

LTTE did not simply teach recruits how to fight; the process also aimed at creating new political subjectivities and building a new community. By imposing discipline and punishment, exercising control over the recruits' bodies, and spreading nationalist narratives, they sought to turn these young people into freedom fighters, embodying the political will of the organization. It will also be shown that, while the LTTE was a secular organization, religious language provided the cultural concepts to understand ascetic life and the possibility of sacrifice for the homeland demanded of the fighters.

Drawing on the life story of Shanthini, a woman who enlisted at the age of thirteen in an elite unit, [chapter 3](#) addresses the issue of belonging to an armed group from a female perspective. In a country where militarism had become a social value ([de Mel 2007](#)), enlistment in the LTTE offered marginalized youth the opportunity to pursue a career and gain social prestige; in other words, it provided a form of empowerment in the face of daily circumstances that degrade and humiliate individuals.

This chapter also addresses the issue of emotions. The LTTE were fully aware of the importance of the emotions of those who supported their cause. They had implemented an 'emotional regime' ([Reddy 2001](#): 129), which included 'sensitisation devices' designed to create opportunities for experiencing feelings that were tactically appropriate to the situation and to enable militants to act in accordance with the organization's expectations ([Traïni and Siméant 2009](#): 13, 25). In other words, fighters were trained not to fear going into combat, not to cry when a comrade in arms died; at the same time, other emotions were encouraged: enthusiasm for the LTTE cause, the spirit of sacrifice, love for the homeland and devotion to the leader, Prabhakaran.

Already introduced in [chapter 2](#), the theme of the importance of the body will be explored further in [chapter 4](#). Through the life story of Kathiravan, a secret agent of the LTTE who was arrested and tortured by the Sri Lankan Intelligence Services, this chapter will examine the incorporation of history, bodily memory and the body as a register of truth. In the second section, the perspective will be broadened with an analysis of the fighters' injuries. The stories of episodes where they faced death are recounted and interpreted by the former fighters through the LTTE culture, that is, as trials demonstrating their loyalty to their cause: they risked their lives for the 'Tamil cause'.

The world built by the LTTE, which I analyse in detail in the first four chapters, was completely destroyed with the defeat in 2009. [Chapter 5](#) first focuses on the narratives of defeat; secondly, it addresses demobilization and life in exile. Defeat, demobilization and exile undo the world of the fighters. As I will see, defeat is much more than a military and

political event: it is an entire cultural system that is defeated, values and a worldview that are deeply shaken. During their service in the LTTE, the fighters lived within a group pursuing a collective goal, where the bonds between comrades were strong; with demobilization and exile, their life paths become individualized; the veterans find themselves in a state of ‘social invisibility’, living an ‘internal exile’.

Notes

1. At its founding, the armed group was called the Tamil New Tigers. The name was changed to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1976.
2. The italics are in the original text.
3. I will examine in greater detail the question of whether recruitment was voluntary or coerced in chapter 2.
4. The italics are in the original text.
5. I did not limit myself to giving pseudonyms to all the interviewees; I used other methods to make their identification more difficult. Firstly, I avoided mentioning certain information that could easily make them recognizable. Then, whenever necessary, I altered personal characteristics such as age, profession, place of residence, etc. As Aude Béliard and Jean-Sébastien Eideliman argue, this approach is acceptable as long as ‘symbolic equivalents’ are found that do not affect the analysis, such as substituting one city for another of the same size, or one profession for another that implies a similar social background (Béliard and Eideliman 2008: 132).