

Becoming a Fearless Tiger

The Social Conditions for the Production of LTTE Fighters

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article offers an analysis of how a revolutionary organization—the LTTE in the Sri Lankan civil war (1983–2009)—used military training camps to produce new members. By framing war as a “transformative social condition” (Lubkemann 2008), I will show that the LTTE did not only teach recruits how to fight but also attempted to produce new political subjectivities and construct a new community. Through the imposition of discipline and punishments, control over the recruits’ body and emotions, and the spread of nationalistic narratives, the LTTE aimed to transform them into freedom fighters embodying the political will of the organization. The proposed research on a self-making process under an authoritarian regime will lead us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the contrast that is usually drawn between will and coercion.

■ **KEYWORDS:** body, discipline, emotions, LTTE, military training, violence

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

Kathiravan, former LTTE fighter

In the war fought for the independence of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 2009, fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) experienced injuries, punishments, total obedience to their superiors, the impossibility to speak freely, separation from their families, the lack of a salary and, ultimately, defeat and annihilation. However, all the exiled fighters I met during my ethnographic fieldwork in Paris (2008–2018) were keen to make the following point: they had been loyal and had given everything to the LTTE, and they were proud of their choice to join the organization. Why and how did fighters accept to serve under the LTTE’s authoritarian rule? How did the LTTE succeed in producing men and women so determined to die and kill for their aims? How could a “small child”—as a fighter described himself prior to enlisting—turn into a disciplined soldier?

To answer these questions, I draw on Lubkemann’s (2008) framing of war as a “transformative social condition” and expand it through an analysis of how a revolutionary organization aimed to transform its own members. I will show that the LTTE not only taught recruits how to fight but also aimed to transform them into freedom fighters who embody the political will of the organization and are willing to sacrifice themselves for the national liberation (*Cutantirram*). These policies of social and political transformation were primarily directed toward LTTE



members than the broader Tamil community (Thiranagama 2011). Indeed, its leader Prabhakaran used to praise his fighters as being different and better than civilians.

Existing research shows how non-state armies shape fighters' subjectivity through control over their bodies and emotions, nationalistic narratives, political rituals, and artistic forms of expression (Aretxaga 1997; Feldman 1991). As shown by Olivier Grojean (2014) for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Younes Saramifar for Hezbollah (2015), it is in training camps that such organizations produce the soldiers who are to represent the values of the society they envisage, and thus where the project of transforming the individual and building a new community is most intense. Due to the importance of these training camps as sites of transformation, this article will focus on the military training endured by former LTTE fighters. This analysis of the ways in which the LTTE produced members¹ raises many questions: What elements of previous civilian life did recruits have to give up? What did the novelties required to be a freedom fighter consist of? How were the LTTE leading this process of change? How did the fighters internalize the organization's project and imaginary? The broader aim of the following research on a self-making process under an authoritarian organization is to contribute to the debate on adherence or resistance to a totalitarian regime (Amarasuriya et al. 2020; Holbraad 2014; Yurchak 2003). Since war is a complex "social condition" that transforms pre-existing social relations and brings about important changes in social life (Lubkemann 2008: 23), I will analyze how an institution attempts to produce new political subjectivities and construct a new community through a combination of coercive and sensitizing methods (Foucault 1977; Grojean 2015). It will lead us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the contrast that is usually drawn between will and coercion.

The Production of New Men and Women

The LTTE wanted to produce soldiers who would put the struggle for liberation ahead of their own egos and desires, who would be obedient, disciplined, courageous, and willing to die for the homeland. The leader Prabhakaran hardly saw any of these characteristics in civilians who did not participate in the national liberation struggle.² The transition from civilian to soldier was a considerable challenge for men, but it was even more radical for women since it was the antithesis of their traditional role as wives and mothers (Maunaguru 2009). In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists developed the idea of a *new woman* (*Puthumai Pen*) who was no longer subordinate to men and rejected the passive and submissive qualities traditionally attributed to Tamil women (Maunaguru 2009: 164). For the LTTE, women's transition to armed struggle represented a further step in the struggle against patriarchy (Ann 1993). To define this new identity of women combatants, the LTTE coined the neologism *Ah-lu-mai*, meaning "governance, authority or leadership roles" and "authorize, give power, make able" (Herath 2011: 163). However, the idea of changing people during a period of insurgence is not an invention of the LTTE but is found across a wide range of historical contexts.

The premises to the idea of a revolutionary regeneration of man and the social body were laid by the French Revolution (Ozouf 1989: 116–157 in Grojean 2014: 1). After WWI, this idea spread throughout Europe and was partially enacted by the Soviet Union and Fascist Italy (Grojean 2014). Since then, it has inspired so many states and political and religious movements across the world that it would be superfluous to list them (Grojean 2014). The attempt to produce new men and women in socialist countries has been analyzed through the ethnography of discourses and political rituals in Soviet Russia (Yurchak 2003), the ontology of the Revolution (Holbraad 2014), education (Blum 2011) in Cuba, and peasant cooperatives in Sandinista Nic-

aragua (Montoya 2012). While insurgencies in other contexts did not theorize the creation of new men as in the socialist tradition, ethnographies on non-state armies show that militancy means more than having a political aim and learning how to fight. Rather, militancy also has a deep impact on fighters' identity and subjectivity and contributes to creating a new community (Aretxaga 1997; Feldman 1991; Hedlund 2020; Hoffman 2011; Pudal 2018). As Saramifar (2015) has shown for the Hezbollah and Grojean (2014) for the PKK, this transformation is consciously guided by the insurgent group through military training; it is here that a recruit leaves his or her previous social life to embark on the life of a freedom fighter willing to sacrifice himself or herself for the aims of the insurgent group.

When it comes to the process of becoming a fighter, emotions have great mobilizing power (Blom and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2020). Resentment, pain, rage, hate, and other negative emotions may play an important role in leading individuals to engage in armed struggle (Sundar 2020). However, according to Moore (1978), they also need something else to help them go beyond feelings of powerlessness and resignation and to give them the courage and hope to fight against their oppressor. This "something else" may be provided by a social movement or non-state army that uses emotions in an instrumental way: it helps to overcome fear, fosters bravery, and stimulates collective action (Chua 2018: 23). Lynette Chua argues that engagement in a social movement entails a "grievance transformation" that "embodies and produces emotions that shape values and ideas in ways that are inseparable from cognition" (Chua 2018: 23). Indeed, the LTTE fighters view their community's suffering as an injustice that only the LTTE can transform into something positive by building the Tamil nation.

Scholarship on the LTTE is based more on a cultural analysis of narratives and political rituals (Fuglerud 2011; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005; Roberts 1996; Schalk 1997; Trawick 2007) than on embodied experiences. Narratives and political rituals are paramount for being a fighter, but in Sri Lanka civilians were as swamped with LTTE propaganda as fighters were. The LTTE transformed recruits into fighters not through the teaching of political doctrines and ideology, which in many cases did not take place at all, but through the attempt to control and shape the recruits' bodies. The trainees experienced the institution (i.e., the LTTE) through drills, hard discipline, and numerous punishments. In this regard, I would conceive of the body as "the existential ground of culture," that is to say as the starting point for considering human participation in 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). But in the case of fighters, embodied participation in the cultural world and becoming new political subjects are mainly achieved through the power and violence of the institution that is training them (Foucault 1977; Higate 2013; Teboul 2017). The body is indeed "the place, par excellence, on which the mark of power is imprinted" (Fassin and d'Halluin 2005: 597). The issue, then, is how a nationalist organization can produce new political subjectivities and a new collectivity by imposing power on trainees' bodies. The body produced is not a generic warrior's body but reflects the cultural construction of LTTE militancy as a liberation struggle, whereby fighters are not afraid to die for their homeland and do not complain about being injured or about the hard discipline to which they are subjected.

Building a Liberation Army

The LTTE was founded in 1972 with the aim of gaining independence for the northeast of Sri Lanka, a territory that the Tamil minority considered their home. Before 1983 the LTTE was only made up of a few dozen men. In this period a handful of men went to Lebanon to train

with the Palestine Liberation Organization (Swamy 1994: 98–99). Others were trained in Tamil Nadu (India) by retired Indian army officers or in training camps in Mullaitivu and Vavuniya (Swamy 1994: 97). After the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, hundreds of new recruits enlisted, while the Indian secret services started training the LTTE and four other Tamil revolutionary groups in India (Swamy 1994). After having attacked and weakened these rival groups, and after having resisted the Indian Peace Keeping Force sent to Sri Lanka to “disarm” them (1987–1991), the LTTE began creating the authority and sovereignty of a new nation-state by establishing a justice system, a police force, taxation, and banks (Klem and Maunaguru 2017). From the 1990s onward, they acquired conventional army capabilities (Hashim 2013: 31–33). The LTTE composed a land army, a navy, a suicide commando (Black Tigers), and a small air force that was deployed for the first time in 2006. Servicewomen represented about one third of the cadres.³

The amount of time devoted to training would vary depending on the context. In the first half of the 1980s, recruits would normally only undergo a three-month basic training course on guerrilla warfare (Swamy 1994). In the following years, to this basic training another three-month course was added, devoted to more specific training, depending on which section the new fighter had been allocated (artillery, navy, infantry, etc.). Furthermore, the LTTE had elite corps (Black Tigers, Charles Anthony Brigade, Leopard Brigade) whose training lasted up to two years.

The LTTE asked each family to send a child for the national liberation struggle. Significant cases of desertion only occurred in the 1980s and in the last four years of the war (Hashim 2013). In the 1980s many leftist cadres quit the Tigers because they no longer identified with the authoritarian style of the LTTE leadership. This was still a generation that could choose what political path to follow; many insurgent groups and Tamil political parties were still in the game (Cheran 2009). A fighter who enlisted in 1987 explained the difference between his generation and the younger one: “My generation and I still have some capability of analysis, observation and critique, but the younger ones, those born in the 1980s, accepted everything [the leader] Prabhakaran did.” The generation who enlisted from 1990 onward, grew up in a war context where the LTTE had imposed itself as the only actor representing the Tamil struggle. Hence, young people were left with the alternative to either join the LTTE or remain silent (Thiranagama 2011).

Short on fighters in the last years of war, the LTTE established wide-scale mandatory recruitment. This proved a complete failure, because the Tamil population protested and the quality of the training decreased dramatically. In 2006, training lasted only one week, and the new recruits proved to be unmotivated and unwilling to fight; cases of desertion increased significantly (Hashim 2013: 151, 194).

My interlocutors volunteered when they were 13–20 years old, the average enlistment age being 15.7. They almost all came from Jaffna, enlisted between 1987 and 2000, and remained in the organization for more than 10 years. Because of the lack of archives and ethnographic studies on the first and last generation, this article does not cover the whole history of the LTTE. Rather, it sees the Tigers through the eyes of a generation who grew up during the war and knew the LTTE in their most powerful phase.

Ethics and Methods of the Ethnographic Encounter

The self-making process that occurred during fighters’ training is presented here through a second, multi-layered self-making process: storytelling. Fighters’ life stories emerge through the ethnographic context, but their categories and ways of thinking and feeling were constructed during their service in the LTTE. According to Arendt’s narrative theory (1958), the

self becomes a concrete reality only when it is expressed in a public sphere through action and narrative. Because a life “story is always situated” and is addressed to an audience (Abu-Lughod 2008: 15), the self is always inter-subjective and inserts into what is invariably an in-between space. The narrated self takes shape in an “already existing web of human relationships” (Arendt 1958: 184), which for my interlocutors revolves around the following aspects: demobilization and reintegration into civilian life, the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, and their relations with French society and the Tamil community in Paris (in which they are often discriminated against and do not receive the recognition they expect). These elements, which make life difficult for ex-combatants, also influence the ways in which they see themselves and relate to others. As such, they are a fundamental part of the memorial processes at work in these individuals’ storytelling. Since I have already dealt with such topics elsewhere (Mantovan 2015, 2022), I will not dwell on them any further. It is important to stress that despite having a decent life in France, these individuals remain attached to their identity as combatants by producing nostalgic narratives. They have not begun to rethink their history and to fashion a new identity for themselves (or, at any rate, they had not begun to do so at the time when I met them), but they make sense of their life journey by still using the LTTE’s categories and way of thinking.

I made the acquaintance of former fighters through my key informant, Vimal, whom I met for the first time in February 2008 in Paris. Since then, our common interest in Tamil politics has gone hand in hand with a growing mutual trust and friendship. However, it took Vimal over a year to trust me enough to confess that he had many friends who were fighters. Little by little, he introduced them to me, vouching for the fact that I was not a spy. Vimal was born in Jaffna in 1975, into a Dalit and Marxist family fighting against the caste system. After moving to France during his adolescence, he studied philosophy and developed a critical way of thinking; he accepted the idea that the LTTE could be criticized, in sharp contrast to the LTTE’s intolerance of criticism.

I met several former fighters but only requested interviews with those whose trust I had already gained. Although I have interviewed many activists who used to work for the LTTE, in this article I will focus only on my discussions with fighters: 14 combatants (only two of them women), some of whom I met more than once, for a total of 23 recorded interviews. These in-depth conversations usually lasted two or three hours, with some taking between 90 minutes and 7 hours. Interviews were often difficult not only because it is always hard for people to talk about painful events but also because LTTE activities were strictly secret, and some fighters failed to realize the importance of their testimonies. Trained to keep their secrets, fighters tended to mistrust everybody. Moreover, my interlocutors’ secrets were not just something of interest to security forces but also intimate memories which they were often reluctant to share with an outsider. Indeed, for subaltern people secrets are constitutive of identity and cultural resistance (Feldman 1991: 11). However, secrets are always “in movement” (Lovell 2007: 58)—they are constantly being made and unmade (Adell 2014: 4). Thus, our conversations were a kind of ongoing interplay where boundaries were both drawn and transgressed.

A Blank Slate

During the 1970s and 1980s, Sri Lanka experienced a period of “uneven modernity” characterized by the mismatch between high levels of education and very low levels of employment, especially among educated youth (Spencer 2000: 125). In the Tamil regions, which were industrially underdeveloped, young people’s aspirations mainly concerned white-collar jobs. However, institutional discrimination against the Tamil, such as the establishment of Sinhala as the

only official language in 1956 and the 1972 university admissions reform, which strongly penalized Tamil students (Cheran 2009), created great frustration because it reduced Tamils' chances of finding employment in the state administration.

The discontent of Tamil youth was also directed toward Tamil political parties, which were completely dominated by old elites from Jaffna and Colombo and belonged to the dominant Vellalar caste (Cheran 2009). These parties were accused of being unsuccessful and too moderate in their defense of Tamil rights, while also maintaining a gerontocratic hierarchy in Tamil society (Cheran 2009). Tamil society itself, dominated by caste, patriarchy, and generational inequalities, was viewed as a space that needed to be reformed (Thiranagama 2011: 197). For young and often unmarried women and men, militancy in an armed group offered a chance to belong to a group organized according to horizontal bonds, something completely absent in traditional families, which were dominated by rigid vertical bonds based on caste and marriage (Thiranagama 2011: 198).

Furthermore, the Sri Lankan government applied all the methods of counterinsurgency warfare; torture, kidnapping, assassinations, arbitrary detention, and the bombing of civilian targets became the norm. The escalation of the level of violence year after year created feelings of pain, anger, resentment, and helplessness. Through their propaganda, cult of martyrs, and artworks, the LTTE appropriated the suffering of the population (Fuglerud 1999: 154; Natali 2004, 2005; Schalk 1997; Trawick 2007); they attempted to bring the population out of its state of dejection and resignation by awakening strong feelings about the plan to build a Tamil nation.

Torn between this historical context and the military occupation, teenage boys and girls would contact LTTE militants in various ways: during public demonstrations or other meetings with militants; when fighters visited villages in search of food and shelter; through their families (particularly in the later phase of the war); and frequently in schools, where LTTE propaganda was very strong. Here, those willing to enlist would meet a person working for the LTTE who would take them to another person, who would then take them to a secret training camp. According to my interviewees, the process of separation from one's family was similar for everybody: aspiring recruits would leave without telling anyone, for otherwise their parents would not let them go.

In state armies observed elsewhere (Teboul 2017), recruits are stripped of all those social conditions which have shaped the way they approach the world, i.e., their social and personal background. This happens from the very first day through the haircut and uniform they receive, and their confinement to the barracks. A similar process of erasing the recruits' background also occurred in the LTTE, though in a more violent way. The first bond that young Tamils had to sever was with their families: they were not allowed to see any relatives during training and, even after this phase, they were only allowed to visit them occasionally. In Tamil militancy, kinship was explicitly and performatively constructed as an alternative to traditional kinship (Thiranagama 2011: 184). Secondly, privileges deriving from caste, class, and gender were forbidden; all trainees were equal and subject to the same discipline and rules. By replacing the recruits' names with *noms de guerre*, and establishing their new social status, the LTTE performed an official inaugural rite which marked recruits' access to a new form of social existence and a new identity.

Sweet Punishments: The Individual Vis-à-Vis Authority

Shanthini recounts a normal training day for trainees of the Leopard Brigade (*Siruthai Puligal*), an elite corps where she had also been a military instructor for some time. She gave me a rather humorous description: she described all the drills and punishments as something amusing. In this brigade there were no courses in politics and ideology.

[In the morning] after swearing the oath, they'd take us to a running track, a kilometer long, and give us 50 minutes to run 10 kilometers. You have to run really, really fast to run 10 kilometers in 50 minutes. It's hard! We had to run on this bit here [*she point to her toes*]. We weren't allowed to put our feet down when running. When you run on your toes, you get tired really fast, and that's why we had to learn to run on our toes . . . like leopards. . . . When we ran and put the whole sole down: *punishment!* The *punishment* was to run on the spot, but just on the very tips of your toes. . . . There was a whole group of women running, and the smartest, they'd hide, and then join the group again for the second lap. [*laughs*] The trainers didn't follow us the whole time, but if you got caught, another punishment! Instead of running five laps, you'd have to run twenty! [*still laughing*]

At 9:00 a.m., once sports were over, we'd go and wash again, then have some tea and breakfast. But first, we had to eat two raw eggs. Someone would get the eggs, then the trainer would pass, and we'd all be there with our mouths open, like this, and they'd go: pop! pop! pop! [*miming the action*] Only after that were we allowed some tea.

After breakfast, we had classes until 12:30. The classes were on all types of weapons and on the LTTE administration. As we were in an elite regiment, there was lots to learn about weapons, weapon techniques, etc.

Then, from 12:30 to 1:30, it was lunch. . . . They imposed the menu, which we had to eat. For example, there were some who didn't like spinach, some who didn't like tomatoes, but we had no choice. If you threw any food on the floor, it'd be picked up, sand, earth and all, and you'd have to eat it with the dirt.

Then from 1:30 to 3:30, it was the regiment orchestra time, and everybody knew how to play.

Then after that, until 4:30, we had martial arts, karate, traditional Tamil martial arts, and then yoga classes, and especially breathing.

Then in the evening, we had training again, but more military this time: climbing ropes, jumping obstacles, crawling through trenches, running, jumping. . . .

To *transform* the trainees into fighters, the LTTE *controlled* their bodies through physical conditioning and discipline. This was achieved, first, by imposing a strict military routine; as we can see from the previous description, all participants had to adapt their behavior to the group's daily schedule. They never had any time to themselves. Even at night, they could not sleep "freely": "We had to sleep . . . prudently," Shantini declared, because when recruits heard a whistle blow, they had to go as quickly as possible to a place that had previously been designated by the instructor.

Secondly, the physical exercises were repeated many times and always in the same way. This kind of practice is not only useful to acquire various "techniques of the body" (Mauss 1966) that make the body able to fight, but it also standardizes all the recruits' bodies. In such a way, the recruits' practices conform to those of their instructor and to one another's. Brian Lande observed that trainees must tune their breathing to that of their instructor. Keeping the correct posture and breathing correctly is perceived by comrades as an indicator of being worthy of belonging to a team, as the sign of a person whose competence can be trusted (Lande 2007). All bodies, united as one, create an *esprit de corps* because they "tend to unite the recruits around common practices, to standardize not only their thoughts, but also their desires" (Byron-Portet 2012: 52 in Teboul 2017: 113). This creates a form of solidarity within the group that, according to some scholars (Smith 2008: 280), is even more important than discipline and fighting for one's country; soldiers fight and sacrifice themselves primarily for their comrades. It follows that the fighters' self is less self-centered and more oriented toward a collective self, as witnessed by the title of a poem dedicated to fallen LTTE heroes: "He Guards the 'We,' Having Destroyed

the ‘T’ (Having Destroyed Himself, He Will Guard Us)” (Jeya in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005: 135–136).

The creation of bonds of camaraderie is reinforced by the idea of being part of a new family. Since service in the LTTE did not allow fighters to maintain close links with their families, they would shut down their emotional connection with relatives, which would be *replaced* by links with their comrades. They felt surrounded by a very protective group of people, and relationships and friendships between comrades were extremely strong: “In the LTTE, when you had a real relationship with someone, they would give their life for you.” These close relationships between comrades led them to conceive of their bond with the LTTE as a family one. As in other Tamil militant groups, fighters referred to one another as siblings: *Akka* (older sister), *Tangachchi* (younger sister), *Annan* (older brother) and *Thamby* (younger brother). Moreover, when fighters visited their families, they would not say they were “returning” home, but that they were going “outside” the barracks (Thiranagama 2011: 201). The LTTE had become their home and their family. Indeed, the LTTE was seen as a protective mother (Herath 2011: 105–106), superimposed upon—and coinciding with—the homeland; as a feminine, even maternal figure: the mother of all Tamils.

Last but not least, the use of frequent punishments aimed to internalize discipline. During her time as an instructor, Shanthini herself meted out punishments to the trainees:

Shanthini: Servicewomen were scared when they saw me [*she laughs*]. . . . because punishments were very hard!

Author: Oh, really? Did you inflict many punishments?

Shanthini: Punishments! [*She laughs*] I was very fast when I trained people. I joked and laughed with everybody, but later, when I was in charge of training. . . . It was my position, and I had my authority!

Punishment is not merely a method that regulates trainees’ activity during the training phase. It is a considerably thorough disciplinary practice, intended to produce a subject who has internalized “military principles,” which become “part of who he is” (Sasson-Levy 2008: 304).

Punishment and discipline were part of the fighters’ submission to the LTTE, which was declared every day through the following oath:

For the supreme cause of our revolutionary movement, which is the liberation of Tamil Eelam, egalitarian and sovereign, I swear the oath that I will fight with all my soul, my life, my body and my goods, and I will freely accept the command of our leader, the honorable Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The thirst of the Tigers is the motherland Tamil Eelam [repeated three times].

Standing together solemnly and swearing their unconditional loyalty to the LTTE with one voice was another moment when the fighters constituted a single body. No matter their rank, they all recited the same oath, they were all willing to do everything that the LTTE required of them, and they all accepted the possibility of dying for their leader. By this very act, the horizontal bonds between cadres (equality) and the vertical ones (submission to the leader) were affirmed and enacted every day.

When I mentioned Prabhakaran to my hosts, they all warmly expressed their admiration for the leader. Prabhakaran was both the leader and the older brother (*Annan*): “The term *Annan*,” a fighter told me, “means brotherly trust: he is the older brother who will never hurt the family and who will sacrifice himself for it.” Prabhakaran represented the purity, asceticism and abnegation of the fight for Eelam (Thiranagaman 2020: 6) and was surrounded by a vocabulary of

love. Indeed, “loyalty and love of the leader was understood as the architecture of the LTTE” (Thiranagama 2020: 5). For people who had left their biological family, the leader became a new object of love (Thiranagama 2020: 6); as Prabhakaran was the only person who could fruitfully lead the LTTE, fighters chose to obey the leader, seeing this not as a negative act of submission but rather as something indispensable and desirable if they were to fulfill their aims.

In his famous description of the production of the soldier and his “docile body”, Foucault suggested that subjectivity is created by a “political technology of the body” (1977: 26), whereby “calculated constraint” goes through the body and makes it fit to become the body of a soldier (ibid.: 135). Subjectivity is therefore engendered through procedures that employ discipline, rules, constraints, and punishments (ibid.: 29). Although this analysis is correct, other important elements in the construction of the soldier have been underestimated by Foucault, namely the motivation to fight, the emotions aroused by war, and the bonds between comrades (Smith 2008). Contemporary professional soldiers are considered to be very different from the soldiers of the modern period. Whereas soldiers in the past were defined according to a marked Cartesian separation between body and mind—they were expected to be healthy and strong so that they could be deployed as fighting machines—today’s professional soldiers are trained according to a more global conception of the individual person as someone capable of operating in all kinds of different circumstances (Sookermany 2011: 481). As a matter of fact, according to those I have interviewed, the LTTE would condition fighters to develop their personal qualities. This aimed to produce combatants who incorporated the organization’s political will and were able to operate in all contexts, according to the different roles available within the organization; for example, after years in a section specializing in ambushes, one man was sent to a school for air pilots, another became responsible for liaising with the associations in the diaspora, and so forth.

Ascetic Heroes

This self-making based on discipline, physical conditioning, and punishment would not succeed if it were not accompanied by recruits’ motivation to fight and sacrifice themselves. The cultural construction of the freedom fighter (*Poorali*) and martyrdom play a key role here.

The various cultural expressions of the LTTE (Great Heroes’ Day, narratives, and artistic productions), as well as Prabhakaran’s speeches, all celebrated the fighters’ bravery and fearlessness. The LTTE produced films and songs, which were broadcast and aired all the time on the streets, radio, and television. This imaginary of bravery and sacrifice was inspired by the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu and the war songs found in the *Purananuru*, a classic of ancient Tamil literature (Schalk 1997).

The following excerpt comes from a pamphlet, *Children of the Sun*, distributed on Great Heroes’ Day in 2001. These last lines describe the death of a soldier who has sacrificed himself to hold his position. It is emphasized that his courage led to his death, which makes him part of the history of the Tamil nation: “It was clear to him that it was a deadly decision. Yet, he did not want to become a coward. . . . On his beloved soil, his body lay crushed by the wheels of the tank. The courage which arose in him to the end will continue to elevate him today in history” (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005: 128–129). The veneration of martyrs and artwork devoted to them, of which the recruits were already aware before enlisting, made the young fighters used to the idea that they would give their lives for national liberation.

“A liberation fighter,” Prabhakaran said, “is not an ordinary human being who lives an ordinary human life. He is an idealist. He lives for a great aim. He lives not for himself, but for others. He lives for the well-being and liberation of others. The selfless and detached life of a liberation

fighter is lofty and has meaning” (Prabhakaran 2007: 276). Fighters are described here as similar to South Asian renunciants who withdraw from mundane life. Shah observed that many leaders of the Naxalites, the Indian Maoist guerrilla, were following the Hindu path of renunciation from mundane life before engaging in politics (Shah 2019). In the case of the LTTE, the reverse process occurred; in Prabhakaran’s biography (Swamy 2003) there is no sign of any interest in renunciation on his part before he founded the LTTE. Moreover, when I asked my interviewees about their religion, they always answered very briefly; they did not think their religious practices were relevant in their choice of fighting for the LTTE. Tamil nationalism is indeed based on language, not religion (Ramaswamy 1997). Fighters’ ascetic life began when they joined the LTTE: “When we got to the end of the training,” Kamal declared, “we understood the saintliness of the cause, the purity of the movement. Embodying this saintliness of the cause is our first weapon.” References to religious concepts (mainly Hindu ones) helped make the struggle of the LTTE sacred: independence became the “sacred aim” to which Tamil devotion must be dedicated (Schalk 1997). Fighters’ lives were based on abnegation and hard discipline. Combatants were committed to abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and sexual relations outside of the legitimate framework of marriage. In the fighters’ eyes, these rules reflected the ideal of purity to which they aspired (Natali 2004: 170).

When I asked a man about his religion, he told me without any enthusiasm that he was Hindu; he then added, more emphatically, that “*Maaveerar* [martyrs] are our Gods!” Natali formulated the hypothesis that the LTTE made a more or less conscious attempt to replace the traditional pantheon with a new one, where the leader Prabhakaran and the martyrs occupied the symbolic space reserved for deities (2004: 179). Though from the very beginning the life of guerrilla fighters was one of deprivation of mundane pleasure, the unofficial yet widespread sacralization of Prabhakaran and the martyrs is the product of the LTTE’s historical development. In 1991 the LTTE reformed Great Heroes’ Day (*Maaveerar Naal*), the commemoration of *Maaveerar* (“great heroes”), that is, deceased fighters. As Natali explains (2004), during the 1980s *Maaveerar*’s remains would be cremated in accordance with Hindu tradition, and the ashes would be returned to their families. From the 1990s onward, however, the LTTE began to have their own burials for their martyrs, who would then be laid to rest in special cemeteries named *Tuilum Illam*, literally ‘Sleeping Houses’. Fighters and civilians both compared LTTE cemeteries to temples, and associated martyrs with divinities (Natali 2004: 134, 173). The *Tuilum Illam* are gardens in which the martyrs are ‘planted’ like seeds in the soil: “It is the blood of the hero that reddens the soil, germinating new life” (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005, 124). Fighters were bound to the idea of self-sacrifice in their everyday lives by the cyanide vial (*Kuppi*) they kept on a string around their neck, which they were expected to swallow to avoid being captured alive. The cyanide vial, given to the recruits at the end of the training period, as a badge of ownership, symbolically and perpetually bound each fighter to the LTTE struggle (Fuglerud 1999). Martyrdom transformed the pain felt at the death of one’s comrades into a “powerful creative emotional force” (Shah 2019: 94). Indeed, in many speeches Prabhakaran (2007) said that the Tamil nation (*Tamil Eelam*) will sprout up from the fighters’ sacrifice.

This culture of sacrifice helped manage the emotions aroused by death in combat. The LTTE created an “emotional regime,” that is, a “set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices, and emotives that express and inculcate them” (Reddy 2001: 129). They aimed to create the opportunity to experience feelings that were tactically appropriate to the situation and to enable militants to act according to the organization’s expectations. This emotional regime made fighters capable of not being overwhelmed by their emotions in certain critical situations, such as fear in combat or pain at the fall of a comrade; in the latter case, they would not express any distress at all (Natali 2005).

During training, instructors did not speak of fear nor of anger or rage. According to my interlocutors, it is not that they never experienced fear, but they succeeded very well in managing it and in always fulfilling their duty. Their camaraderie and motivations were extremely helpful in achieving this success. One former fighter said that those who went into combat came back with narratives of battle, creating expectations and excitement among those who had not gone to battle yet. Another said he went to battle with euphoria. Trawick noted that fighters described battle as a game (2007: 13).

The only moment that caused some fear was the *baptême du feu*: “I did have a little fear. . . . Right before starting, some people needed to go to the toilet. But once you are in action, you just go, you don’t have fear.” Passing from the *baptême du feu* to successive combats meant swiftly passing from fear to excitement: “When you manage to weaken the enemy lines and you can move ahead, there is even more motivation and adrenaline.” Just like the Israeli soldiers described by Orna Sasson-Levy, the emotional behavior of LTTE fighters was based on two opposite themes: self-control and thrill. The latter coincides with an intense, unbridled feeling in the context of unpredictable encounters, life-threatening peril, and martial intimacy and solidarity among comrades (Sasson-Levy 2008: 298–299). Moreover, the thrill may be emphasized by anger. At first, the Tigers would be angry for all the killings of Tamils carried out by the Sri Lankan army. Then, this emotion would appear only on certain occasions, namely when a comrade died. When I asked a man what he felt when a comrade lost his life, he replied: “I felt angry. When the army decapitated one of my friends, [I thought to myself] I’ll keep my anger and, in the next battle, I’ll decapitate two army soldiers.”

Becoming a Fighter, a Change of Being

While in Hezbollah training camps (Saramifar 2015) and in the PKK military academy (Gorjean 2014) the process of becoming a fighter was based on the correction of previous bad behaviors—sins for the Hezbollah, and capitalistic and egoistic behavior for the PKK—none of my interviewees speak about misbehavior during their previous civilian life. On the contrary, they describe themselves as “normal” children who wanted to go to school and find a decent job but who were forced by government oppression to take up arms to defend their community. This was the common narrative among my interlocutors, who tended not to emphasize their childhood much; since the Tamil problem was collective, they found little point in telling me about their early life, which they thought was common to other Tamils.

For young boys and girls, who before enlisting in the organization or during their first period in the barracks often felt afraid or thought they would not be brave enough, becoming a fighter was an important step toward adulthood which required a considerable degree of bravery. Kamal describes his doubts before enlisting: “Combat resumed with a [suicide] attack by a Black Tiger. . . . I started to ask myself questions: how did these kids, who played with me and were in the same situation as me, have the courage to do this kind of thing? Why didn’t I have their courage?” Being able to overcome his initial fear and completing the hard training gave Kamal great satisfaction: “Even today, I feel a rush of energy when I think of this first day [as a fighter]. [I feel] the pride, the satisfaction of having completed the training, in succeeding in doing it, and in becoming a fighter.” Kamal remembers the changes they experienced at the time of their formal induction as fighters: “We became happy. I don’t know why, but it was as if we had received some strength within us.” The training process did not consist in the mere acquisition of military skills but in a change of being. Recruits felt that they had changed status, becoming something else: fighters for the LTTE. The harshness of the training and the importance of the

LTTE struggle gave them a great feeling of satisfaction and made them proud of having become Tigers.

These changes occur in one's own body, not only through the process of becoming fitter and learning new techniques but above all by experiencing one's body differently (Kamal speaks of 'strength' and a 'rush of energy') and through new emotions ('pride', 'satisfaction', 'happiness'). Kathiravan describes a deep change in his character: "In this three-month period I didn't sleep . . . [*he smiled ironically*] properly, because it gives you power in your heart and in your mind. We were always training, training, training!" This is a difference in the perception of oneself and one's body in phenomenological terms (Merleau-Ponty 1945) that changes the way fighters exist in the world and relate to others.

Kathiravan's story provides a good example of the rapid and profound transformation of a youth. He described his childhood as that of a young boy ("I was a small child") who was the son of two teachers and a diligent student. He enlisted into the LTTE as a volunteer in 1990, at the age of 15, because of the military repression against the Tamil community and the lack of a promising future for Tamil youth. He was selected for the intelligence wing. He described a well-known purge: according to the secret services' leader, Pottu Amman, the second-in-command of the LTTE, Mhathya, was plotting to kill the Tigers' top brass under the direction of Indian intelligence. "First, we killed 75 people—not secretly, but in front of our fellow members. . . . I don't know if it's right or not, but this is the punishment we inflict." Kathiravan declared he loved to fight. In 1994, he was promoted to chief of intelligence for border control between the Vanni and the Vavuniya districts. He felt he had achieved something important: "When you are a leader, you are in a position that gives you much freedom—you are a powerful man." In short, within six months of training, a diligent "small child" had become a fighter entirely devoted to the LTTE who felt he had reached a prestigious position of power.

Kamal described the new life one acquired by becoming a freedom fighter as follows: "It was a very interesting life. Because we are different from normal people. We are the special people among the Tamil people. Because we don't have fear, we don't want anything for ourselves. We are not selfish." In other words, being a member of the LTTE was perceived as being the vanguard of Tamil society, with a sensibility and a mission that ran against the conformism and opportunism of civilian life. Becoming a fighter did not amount to a suspension of one's social life but meant living in a community where social fields had been redrawn. In a country where militarism had become a social value even in popular culture (de Mel 2007), enlisting in the LTTE offered marginalized youth the opportunity to follow a career and gain social prestige.

The Price of Belonging

Comparing the discipline, punishments, and authority described above with that provided by deserters helps us to understand the issue of the link between the individual and the political system in which she or he lives. Shobashakti, a writer who has been living in France since the 1990s, enlisted in the LTTE in 1984, but deserted three years later after realizing that the LTTE was a "fascist organization" because they did not accept different opinions and killed dissidents. In his biography, written in French, he described the punishment administered on the last day of training. It was a test called "How to escape if you are arrested by the police?":

They beat and tortured us as the police would do if they put their hands on us. . . . Surrounded and beaten by a dozen men, there was no way out. In real life too, if one was taken by the police, there wouldn't be any way out. This was the lesson. It was the final test: would

we be able to keep our mouths shut? At every kick, every blow, we had to learn to control ourselves and to endure the pain.” (Jesuthasan and Baron 2017: 39)

In his description of the training (not quoted here), Shobashakti calls his trainers and his superiors “bosses” (“chefs” in French), but I have never heard a fighter use this negative word. Moreover, he mainly refers to the LTTE as “they,” which draws a line between “them” (LTTE/trainers) and “us” (recruits), when in French he could have used the impersonal “on”, which does not mark any difference between “they” and “us”. These linguistic choices and the brutality of the description create a rigid distance between the individual and the LTTE. In the Human Rights Watch report (2004) on LTTE child soldiers, we find the same differences; by speaking of themselves with categories and vocabulary different from those used by the LTTE cadres, former child soldiers establish a clear distance between themselves and the LTTE.

On the contrary, Shantini recounts her career as a journey by which she quickly became “one of them”: a Tiger. Even in the description of her first months of training, the boundary between her and her trainers was not oppressive but maternal and quickly disappeared because at the end of her training she started training new recruits. She recounts the punishments as something amusing because she accepted that being punished was part of the process of becoming a Tiger. When I asked Shanthini how her life had changed in exile, she replied: “The problem is that [here] I’m obliged to conform [to civilian society], whereas if I were back home, I’d be trying to make the country conform to me.” Shanthini felt that the way in which the LTTE were transforming the island was how she herself wished it to be transformed. Shanthini’s identification of herself with the LTTE is total, without any boundaries. This point stands in sharp contrast to the Euro-American tendency to think of the individual’s self as independent from the political regime in which he or she lives (Holbraad 2014), which is why—for example—it often creates misunderstandings in French asylum courts. Magistrates would ask questions to LTTE fighters to discover whether they had *individually* committed any acts contrary to UN principles (acts of terrorism, war crimes, etc.), in which case they would not be granted any protection. But fighters struggled to understand why it was relevant if they had committed any such acts individually, when—in their view—it was the LTTE as a whole that had committed them (Mantovan 2018: 227).

While “acts of dissent . . . set oneself up against the status quo” (Amarasuriya et al. 2020: 2), the LTTE fighters merged their selves with the LTTE’s political regime. To be a Tiger one had to accept the lack of individual freedom, harsh discipline and even purges. Although it was difficult for me to speak about the purges with my interviewees, I got the impression that they accepted them because they trusted the leader’s orders, as Kathiravan declared earlier. In other words, a sort of “cultural anesthesia” (Feldman 1994: 405) underlies the fighters’ interpretative and perceptual categories; they accepted and justified LTTE actions and did not feel any moral qualms that could undermine their will to fight for the Tamil Eelam.

Conclusion: The Embattled Self between Will and Coercion

Stephen Lubkemann argues that war is not a moment of rupture but a complex reconfiguration of political, cultural, and social spheres in which “violence in any given context will generate both new challenges *and* possibilities, new forms of empowerment *and* disempowerment, and affirmations *and* underminings of identity” (2008: 23–24). As I have showed in the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, these changes were carefully led by a non-state army exercising authority and violence over the recruits it sought to mold. At the same time, they were enacted by

Tamil youth who navigated an environment filled with violence, danger, and prohibitions but also with desires, hopes, and some new opportunities.

We have seen that the production of new political subjectivities is a complex process in which different elements are intertwined. Firstly, the LTTE carried out some important groundwork that preceded enlistment. Through nationalistic narratives, artistic productions, and political rituals (such as Great Heroes' Day) and the appropriation of Tamils' suffering, the LTTE harnessed and implemented the desire of marginalized Tamil youth to enlist and fight for their homeland.

Second, the barracks were a crucible of the new Tamil nation. During military training, the "formless clay" of the recruits (Foucault 1977: 135) was shaped through physical conditioning, discipline, punishments, and the creation of bonds of camaraderie. By abandoning themselves to the LTTE, the fighters submitted their ego to the organization, letting go of their individual desires and of possible moral qualms about the LTTE's authoritarian rule in order to become cadres who saw few or no boundaries between themselves and the LTTE. All the sacrifices and limitations to which the fighters were subjected were compensated by the possibility of moving up the career ladder and reaching prestigious positions, the idea of fighting for their own people and being part of Tamil national history.

When I was having a discussion with three fighters who, 10 years after the defeat, continued to say that they were proud of their past in the LTTE, my key informant Vimal commented that they were "*hommes d'état*"—in the sense of servants of the state—somewhat like the Soviet cadres described by Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievitch (2017). The LTTE took young people from a minority group discriminated against by the Sri Lankan state and put them at the center of the project of the nascent Tamil nation-state in which the state and LTTE coincide. Their lives acquired meaning by becoming part of a new collectivity embedded in this nation-building context (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005). In this process, young recruits went through a process of change that was not a suspension of normalcy, but rather a process in which group belonging and the development of one's individuality were redefined according to martial patterns.

I have drawn upon Alexei Yurchak (2003) and Martin Holbraad (2014), who have argued that under revolutionary regimes, such as those of the Soviet Union and socialist Cuba, the authorities aim to produce non-liberal individuals whose selves are not separate from the political form of governance to which they are subject. In other words, while in Euro-American liberal theory the individual is believed to have an autonomous self and independent from the state in which he or she lives, for Tamil fighters the self and the perception of oneself are not separable from the LTTE (Holbraad 2014). I have attempted to expand Yurchak's and Holbraad's analyses by working on the social conditions that promote or reduce willingness to enlist and the thorny issue of the dichotomy between willingness and coercion. First, the degree of willingness to enlist and to accept authoritarian rule varied depending on many social and political factors. We have seen the difference between those who enlisted in the 1980s and those who did so during the following decade—up to the cease-fire of 2002—which was the period in which the LTTE grew the most and gained most consensus. On the contrary, the context of the last stage of the war (2006–2009)—mainly due to the large-scale mandatory recruitment imposed by the LTTE—completely eroded recruits' willingness to undergo training.

Second, in a classic book on counterinsurgency warfare, British General Frank Kitson (2010) wrote that for both the insurgents and the government, the use of coercion *alone* was never enough to gain the support of the population (what was really at stake). My interlocutors told me that it was precisely when they *decided* to enlist that they came to accept the idea of giving their lives to Tamil independence. Throughout this article we have seen how, in the case of recruits, a strong willingness to be part of the LTTE coexisted with various coercive elements.

This teaches us that as much as there is a tendency to think that willingness and coercion are antithetical, they are not always so. Will and coercion are always embedded in a social context in which principles that are theoretically opposed mix and are not necessarily perceived as antithetical by individuals. The production of new men and women occurs through the combining of coercion and will; coercive and sensitizing elements make individuals eager to serve an organization that, by subjugating them, will transform them into the subjects they wish to be.

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■ NOTES

1. All new members would begin their LTTE careers with military training and soldiering.
2. For example, the LTTE used to commemorate the death of its own combatants but not those of Tamil civilians.
3. Probably the only way to make a serious estimate of the number of women in the LTTE is to analyze the number of martyrs (see Natali 2004: 83). The ratio of martyr-servicewomen remains low throughout the 1980s but increases in parallel with the presence of women in the LTTE, until it becomes approximately one in three in the second half of the 1990s.

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