



Touring “Terrorism”: Landscapes of Memory in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan state’s power to narrate the war and characterize the enemy is an expression of “triumphalist nationalism” and is a selective remembering of war. Based on photographs taken during several field visits to these sites by both authors between December 2012 and January 2014, we analyze the relationship of war and tourism and how a particular Sinhala nationalist remembering of the war and landscape of memory are being constructed in post-war Sri Lanka.

Today, Sri Lanka is a former war zone where the Government’s troops defeated the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) and ended 26 years of violent conflict in May 2009. The end of the war came at a huge cost to civilian life in the northern part of the country; the UN estimates that over 40,000 people were killed, most of whom were Tamils who form the majority in Northern Sri Lanka. Despite the end of military conflict, war continues by other means, and its representation encapsulates a nationalist politics of victory that at once vilifies the defeated LTTE “terrorists” and excludes Northern Tamils from the Sri Lankan polis. The LTTE’s former hideouts, training facilities, weapons, and vehicles are now tourist sites on display for public viewing.

Introduction

Memory serves a presentist agenda, even though its subject is the past. No matter how much we strive for a full recuperation of a past event, our selection of facts, the emphases we devote, and the meanings we make are determined by our location in the present; we remember for some purpose, most often expressed as a need to learn how the past can instruct our present and future.

Richards 2005, 617–618

Since 1983, Sri Lanka’s civil war has been fuelled by competing, militarized nationalisms, Sinhala and Tamil (Jayawardena and de Alwis 1996; Piyadasa 1984). By militarized nationalism, we refer to armed groups using violence to achieve political claims to territory that purportedly belongs to a “nation.” Reference is made both to the Sri Lankan state (that is, government troops who act on behalf of a majority Sinhala-led government that has mixed nationalist politics into its governance of the country since independence from Britain in 1948) and to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers), a militant rebel group that formed in the late 1970s with an agenda to create a separate state, known as Tamil Eelam (Swamy 1994).

Contemporary Sri Lanka is an expression of a long struggle well documented by Sri Lankan scholars (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; DeVotta 2004; Jeganathan and Ismail 1995; Tiruchelvam 1996). The decades-long protracted civil war has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced an estimated one million Sri Lankan Tamils abroad (Amarasingam 2013; Fuglerud 1999). In May 2009, the war came to a bloody end, with huge cost to civilian life in the northern part of the country. The United Nations estimates that 40,000–70,000 people were

killed, and much evidence has recently been published that government troops took aim at civilian targets and that the Tigers held civilians hostage, using them as human shields in the final stages of the war (Harrison 2012; ICG Report 2010; Weiss 2011).

The LTTE may have been officially defeated in Sri Lanka, but artifacts of the LTTE's legacy as a "terrorist" organization have become tourist sites actively cultivated by the Sri Lankan government throughout the Vanni in northern Sri Lanka. The Vanni was the center of the LTTE's *de facto* state from the mid-1990s until 2009. Diana Ojeda (2013) shows how tourism in a recent war zone is a way to militarize civilian space during peacetime. In the context of Colombia, citing Roldan, she (2013, 762) notes that

the existence or threat of violence [has been used] to justify the expansion of executive powers, the restriction of civil rights, and the suppression of demonization of dissent, while appearing to do so in defense of democracy and political stability.

We transpose this cautionary note into the Sri Lankan context by analyzing how the Tamil Tigers and their militarized operations are remembered and curated.

As Ernest Renan argues, national solidarity is very much strengthened by overcoming past divisions through selective remembrance. Since all nations have undergone periods of conflict, "it is necessary for people not only to be able to remember their common past but also to forget divisive events" (Rigney 2012, 251). The Sri Lankan Government, however, has chosen a different approach from that of reconciliation and/or granting of autonomy to Tamil majority areas: through its selective remembering of the Tigers and dead Tamil civilians, it stokes a triumphalist Sinhala nationalism that reproduces the Tamil Tigers as a future potential threat, and in so doing, provides grounds for ongoing militarization of civilian spaces by the state and marginalization of Tamils and other minority groups in the country who are represented as latent threats.

In what follows, we analyze the relationship of war and tourism and how a particular Sinhala nationalist remembering of the war and landscape of memory are being constructed in post-war Sri Lanka. In terms of methods, we employ photographs of the relatively new "tourist sites" that are large-scale war memorials, counting them as artifacts of the politicized processes of remembering the war in Northern Sri Lanka. We certainly do *not* use photovoice as a participatory action method that allows community participants to foreground, visually, that which is of importance (Baker and Wang 2006) nor engage the rich literature on visual ethnography (Harper 2002; Pink 2001), which engages ethnographic research incorporating photography, video, or other virtual media. These methods use photographs as a way of engaging in dialog with the photographer about meaning and value as attributed by her/him.

We acknowledge that the selectivity of the photographs on our part is a limitation of this approach, as we have not included all war memorials, but we also believe that this method allows us to share virtually the actually existing monuments and artifacts of the war while they are still accessible. Several of the figures presented here are no longer open to the public. In the context of triumphalist Sinhala nationalism and an authoritarian government, there is little political space to openly interrogate soldiers, government officials, and those curating these sites about their meaning, history, and purpose.

The authors took the photographs during three "tours" to these sites memorializing war between December 2012 and January 2014. We never traveled together, and our configurations of companions were distinct. While both of us are based in North America, one author speaks and reads Tamil; the other traveled with a female Sinhalese colleague from Colombo, who read and spoke Sinhala, which was vital to reading the Sinhala-only signboards identifying most of these sites, despite Tamil being the language spoken by everyone but the military in the area. The

analysis below is derived from dialog and interpretation between the authors and an interactive analysis about the sites.

Some of the war memorials are new creations, erected at the end of the war, while others are the detritus of war made into monuments commemorating dead soldiers and exhibits of LTTE war wares. The choice of photographs from sites and monuments was made based on two considerations: first, we wanted to represent some of the former LTTE installations that the Sri Lankan government has kept as “war tourist” attractions for either foreigners or tourists from the south of the country. Second, we wanted to include several victory monuments that have arisen following the end of the war in order to better understand the rhetoric of victory that the Sinhala nationalist government is portraying to the outside world.

Nationalism and Memorialization

Memory studies, and the memory cultures scholars engage through ethnography, archival work, and other methods analyze how events and people are remembered and the politics of such remembering (Edkins 2003; Kaplan 2005; Till 2006). The importance of memorialization and the politicization of landscapes for the continuing viability of nationalism has been a keen focus of scholarship for some time (Cosgrove 1984; Gillis 1994; Lowenthal 1985; Till 1999). However, as Steinberg and Taylor (2003, 449) state, most of these studies do not focus on sites that have witnessed mass violence, insurgency, or open warfare. We cite this rich literature on the politics of memorializing lives lost but look less at how *war* is narrated and displayed for tourists and look less at the ways in which the tens of thousands of lives lost to war in Sri Lanka (and the 2005 tsunami) are remembered (see Simpson and de Alwis 2008).

The rare use of photographs as a method of capturing processes of remembering is effectively demonstrated in Edward Simpson and Malathi de Alwis' (2008) analysis of the memorial practices that emerged after an earthquake in Gujarat during 2001 and along the eastern and southern coasts of Sri Lanka following the tsunami of 2004. In both cases, acts of memorialization were inseparable from reconstruction initiatives and broader political issues. In contexts of militarized nationalism where violence, loss, and political suppression continue, photographs serve as a kind of witnessing in the mainstream media. Photographs of the legacy of war and its memorials have not been taken up by political geographers in the same way but offer a promising way of critically analyzing war in the form of built space in the absence of political space.

The relationship between nationalism and memorialization of war is important to unpack. As Paul Shackel (2001, 655) notes, “memories can serve individual and collective needs and can validate the holders’ version of the past.” Shackel goes on to rightly argue that memorialization in the public arena is very much linked to power dynamics, whereby dominant cultures can articulate and maintain social inequalities and the otherness of various communities. *What* is remembered is no more important than *how* events, such as war, are remembered. As such, what is memorialized comes to serve the purposes of majoritarian nationalism and its political agendas (De Jorio 2006; Stangl 2008). Acts of remembering are, as Ann Rigney (2012, 251) notes, “as much about shaping the future as about recollecting the past.”

The study of post-war spaces and landmarks can help us understand not only how victors represent their victory, but also how they understand the history of the conflict, the struggles of the aggrieved, and the future of the country. As Steinberg and Taylor (2003, 450) rightly note,

However subtle or limited the scale and number of landmarks, examination of those that do exist in post-conflict landscapes can provide important indicators of past and present political and social relationships.

Perhaps more importantly, the construction, selection, placement, and prominence of these landmarks have the potential to reveal much about the victor’s nationalist project as well as the continuing struggle for power.

Memory in Post-War Sri Lanka: The Broader Landscape

A plethora of geographers have conducted research on the war in Sri Lanka, the displacement it generated during the conflict (Brun 2008; Brun and Jazeel 2009; Hasbullah and Korf 2013; Hyndman and de Alwis 2004), the geopolitics of aid that shapes the political landscape (Hyndman 2007), and the geographies of conflict at the intersection of the conflict and the 2004 tsunami (Blaikie and Lund 2011; Hyndman 2011; Le Billon and Waizenegger 2007), particularly in the North and East of the country. Geographer James Duncan's (1990) book, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (reprinted in 2004) is a foundational text on the political geography of landscape, if not squarely focused on the spaces of war in Sri Lanka's North and East. Yet, there is nothing written by geographers on "war tourism" or the memorialization of the LTTE by the government (or others) known to us, given its recent debut and quickly changing landscape. The former LTTE leader's bunker pictured in Figures 9–11 is no longer open to the public and is rumored to have been destroyed.

Just a decade ago, during the military conflict, one could only drive north on the main A9 highway with a durable jeep and a lot of patience. The roads were horrible and often impassable. Traveling north, one crossed into LTTE-controlled territory at Vavuniya, where things changed in subtle, nationalistic ways. The LTTE-controlled areas were characterized by a distinct time zone, 30 min different than in the capital city of Colombo. Police officers wore uniforms, but the badges sewn on them stated that they worked for Tamil Eelam. LTTE flags were a standard item at all official checkpoints and offices. Foreigners had to show a passport to be admitted into LTTE territory, a performance of sovereignty even if it was not recognized internationally as such. LTTE nationalism also included elaborate ceremonies performed for the families of dead cadres, official Tamil Tiger holidays, and days of mourning up until 2009. The imagined Tamil Eelam map on display along the A9 was a good example of this strong nationalistic symbolism (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. A map of Tamil Eelam on the A9 near Mankulam (Hyndman, taken in 2006).

In the contemporary Sri Lankan context, any trace of Tamil Eelam maps or cemeteries has been erased. Official ways of remembering the war are shaped by the triumphalist Sinhala nationalism of the victor. Contemporary sites of “war tourism” today do not mention legitimate Tamil grievances or aspirations, Tamil civilian casualties during the final stage of the war, or the internment of hundreds of thousands of Tamils immediately after the war ended. Sites that may have humanized the Tamil Tiger movement, such as Prabhakaran’s childhood home, the site of the LTTE’s Jaffna political-wing leader Thileepan’s 1987 fast-unto-death, or the dozens of Tiger cemeteries, have been razed to the ground. De Alwis (2010) is critical of the government’s

myopic and misguided understanding of memory, and its brutal disregard for the feelings and emotions of a people who have undergone unimaginable and innumerable horrors for the past three decades.

She notes that the rationale for these actions, according to the Secretary to the Ministry of Tourism, George Michael, was that the “LTTE and the violence which affected the public during the war should be forgotten.” And yet, the Government has kept the Tiger bunkers, training facilities, and the detritus of war built by the LTTE. It has constructed war museums showcasing LTTE weaponry and fire power, as we show below.

The name of LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the man who led the rebel movement from its inception, is rarely mentioned if at all (we found that it does appear on one military map at the war museum in Puthukkudiyiruppu, aka PTK). In a bizarre way, the post-war tourist sites evince the past power of the LTTE and the threat that they once posed, at sites such as the war museum in PTK. In showing how strong the LTTE were, the government appears stronger in defeating them. In first exalting the LTTE, we are told to appreciate the “heroic” struggle of government forces against them. In order for the government victory to be worthy of praise, in other words, the LTTE must be shown to have been worthy opponents. This victory/defeat narrative resurfaces repeatedly.

In other words, memories of the Tamil Tigers are still publicly present in Sri Lanka, but they are produced by the victor in particular ways: dehumanized and militarized, with the LTTE as a potential and lurking threat that sustains the Sinhala nationalist project of ongoing militarization. When traveling through Jaffna and the Vanni, local people hesitatingly point out razed graveyards and destroyed LTTE sites when asked but walk away quickly or insist that one should be careful if taking out a camera. For instance, when Amarasingam was taking a picture of the site of Thileepan’s fast (Figure 2), he was told by a local Tamil man that “a thousand eyes will be watching you as you take that picture.” Similarly, in December 2012, when Amarasingam stood on the side of the road to capture a photo of a former LTTE cemetery in Mullaitivu that was being converted into a Sri Lankan army camp (Figure 3), a local Tamil man with whom he was traveling ducked down low in their vehicle and later berated him stating, “If they see you, you will board a plane and leave, and we’ll have to deal with the army.”

The division between North and South has not altogether disappeared. An anachronistic checkpoint remains in the city of Omanthai along the A9 highway, once denoting the northern limit of Sri Lankan government control. Smooth “carpet roads” have replaced the impassable potholes of the past, and such infrastructure has become a development priority for the Rajapaksa government (Figure 4). Infrastructure, like these roads, is deployed as a kind of “development” that reinforces and reproduces a powerful Sinhala nationalism. And yet, the carpet roads have a double meaning: many injustices such as lost land, lost family members, and other disappearances have been swept under these roads that are meant to demonstrate modernity and prosperity. The modern convenience of carpet roads for those few who are mobile and well resourced to travel is great, but different groups of course have distinct relationships to mobility. For people displaced by the war and living in the Vanni or Jaffna,



Fig. 2. Site of Thileepan's 1987 fast-unto-death (Amarasingam). In the right corner of the picture is the stage upon which the fast was held. The left of the picture shows the destroyed remains of the statue that was erected in his honor.



Fig. 3. A former LTTE cemetery in Mullaitivu, being converted into an army camp (Amarasingam).

the “improvement” that carpet roads represent is overshadowed by an unacknowledged landscape of widespread displacement, loss, impoverishment, and trauma (Wijedasa 2012).

In contrast to the imagery of the LTTE past, the Government of Sri Lanka feeds its citizens ubiquitous images that embody Sinhala nationalist ideals. For example, a not-so-subtle sign



Fig. 4. New “carpet roads” on the A9 highway (Amarasingam).

situated on a busy roundabout in Anuradhapura in February 2013 shows President Rajapaksa and then states that he, “United the country and brought giant development to the North Central region” (Figure 5). The word “giant” (*yoda*) clearly evokes the great deeds of past Sinhala kings, which are also indicated by a photo of the moonstone (*de Alwis*, personal communication, Feb. 20, 2013). Moonstone, known as *sandakada pahana*, was used in the ancient cities (of which Anuradhapura is one) and thus refers to the glory of the Sinhalese. The sign is only in Sinhala.

In Sri Lanka, the militarization of society continues apace 4 years after the end of military hostilities (Kadiringamar 2013; ICG Report 2012). As Gunasekera (2013, 35) notes, “the military is everywhere, doing everything, from park maintenance to teaching principals how to run their schools.” Everyday reminders that danger is not far off (if roundly defeated) abound, especially in the war monuments and war tourism sites and plaques that claim to narrate terrorist violence. In what follows, we analyze a series of photographs and accompanying texts that represent a



Fig. 5. Sign in Anuradhapura (Hyndman).

tourism of war established by the Sri Lankan Government since the end of the military conflict. Finally, we discuss how this “triumphalist Sinhala nationalism” is exclusionary, defensive, and parochial in a country scarred by more than 25 years of war.

Case Study: Touring “Terror” Sites in Jaffna, Kilinochchi, and Mullaitivu

Driving south on the A9 from the city of Jaffna, one approaches Elephant Pass, the strategic gateway to the Jaffna Peninsula that was fought over by the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army throughout the war. Shortly before driving across the beautiful Jaffna Lagoon, one encounters on the left side the towering Elephant Pass War Hero Memorial, a 42 ft high monument designed by the National Design Centre of Sri Lanka, and ceremonially unveiled by Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa in December 2010, after 18 months of construction (Figure 6). The monument, surrounded by four lions and numerous symbolic images of battle, shows four outstretched arms hoisting a (unified) Sri Lanka, as a Sri Lankan national flag flutters high above. Blooming flowers are also shown to be jutting out of the newly captured Vanni region, ostensibly to symbolize the defeat of “terrorism” and the birth of peace. The barely comprehensible inscription on the monument begins by stating that this was the spot on which “enormous strength, force, power, and determination concentrated from four directions.” It goes on to note that various army divisions “converged on this historical place of Elephant Pass and



Fig. 6. Victory monument on the A9 highway (A. Crosby).

liberated this long-path of brotherhood with a magnitude of force annihilating terrorism and eliminating social-disparities” in January 2009.

The claim by the Sri Lankan Government that it was able to defeat terrorism and “eliminate social-disparities” is important for understanding how the government is narrating the post-war situation in the country. According to the state, as noted above, it is “terrorism” that was the problem in Sri Lanka, and its “annihilation” has led to a landscape in which “social disparities” no longer exist. In other words, the post-war stance of the government rarely acknowledges the *non-violent* political grievances of the Tamil community even before the onset of violence in the 1980s. This argument is repeatedly made and becomes quite evident when visiting these so-called “terrorist” sites: Sri Lanka – a peaceful paradise of an island – was punctured by the unjust political demands of a violent terrorist organization, which, once vanquished, can return to its resplendent state. As Nira Wickramasinghe (2012, 2) states, for instance, in the post-war environment, “President Rajapaksa promised there would no longer be minorities” and that “citizens/patriots would be ethnically undifferentiated.” Following this logic, the Tamil population should in fact be grateful for the actions of the Sri Lankan military, which “rescued” them from the clutches of the LTTE in the final months of the war and made them “Sri Lankan” again.

In this context of Sinhala nationalism, the bizarre, if dramatic, remains of a destroyed water tank in the town of Kilinochchi, located in the heart of the Vanni, begins to make sense (Figure 7). Kilinochchi, the former administrative capital of the LTTE, is on the A9 as one drives south from Jaffna and remains heavily militarized and fortified by army camps and troops. In December 2008, as the Sri Lankan armed forces launched their assault on the city, the LTTE, sensing defeat, decided to destroy the water tank as its forces retreated. Once the war came to a close six months later, the Sri Lankan Government, instead of clearing the destroyed tank or rebuilding it, decided to let it remain in its current state. The destroyed tank fits well with the government narrative discussed above that the LTTE placed the well-being of Tamil



Fig. 7. Destroyed water tank in Kilinochchi with a newly built souvenir store next to it.

civilians as secondary to its own survival. As the Ministry of Defense website (2010) states, “LTTE Terrorists had destroyed the water tank that supplied water to the whole Kilinochchi area on 31st of December before they fled their self-claimed administrative capital. Water being one of the basic human needs of civilians particularly in the dry zone areas, the LTTE has once again demonstrated its callous disregard for the needs of the Tamil civilians.”

The site of the fallen water tank has been transformed into a fully-fledged tourist site, equipped with a plaque and a souvenir store (staffed by military personnel and containing some pictures and children’s toys). The plaque again makes it clear that the remains of the tank are left in place to serve as a constant reminder to the Tamil people of Kilinochchi that the LTTE did not care about them and did not have their best interests at heart. As the plaque states,

This fallen tower was once the source of water – the fountain of life – for the people of Kilinochchi. Destroyed by LTTE terrorists in the face of valiant troops converging on Kilinochchi in January 2009, this tower is a silent witness to the brutality of terrorism. Yet, terrorists did not succeed in destroying our determination to secure freedom and peace. This is a monument to the futility of terror – and to the resilience of the human spirit. Terrorism shall never rise again in our great land. We are free.

With the fall of Kilinochchi in January 2009, the LTTE retreated east, along with hundreds of thousands of civilians, to the towns of Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK), Puttumatalan, and Mullaitivu where most of the heaviest fighting took place. The protracted civil war would finally come to its bloody conclusion on the shores of the Nandikadal Lagoon in mid-May 2009.

While Kilinochchi was the administrative capital of the LTTE’s *de facto* state in the Vanni area at the end of the war, Prabhakaran lived in a series of houses closer to Visuvamadu and PTK. These bunkers, visited by the authors in 2012 and 2013, have been converted into army camps as well as tourist sites. Busloads of tourists would arrive throughout the day and were given a guided tour, mostly in Sinhala, by a member of the armed forces. In an even more bizarre twist, many of these sites now have cafes attached to them where tourists can sit and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee, made and brought to your table by a Sri Lankan soldier. Next to the “terrorist swimming pool” in Visuvamadu, a small dusty town about 20 km from PTK, one can sit at Café 68 (named after the military division serving there) and look out at Prabhakaran’s swimming pool, ostensibly where Sea Tigers were trained in diving but also where the (unnamed) LTTE leader “floated in luxury” on hot days (see Figure 8). Given the bad roads and remote location of this huge pool, its existence is something of a tribute to the LTTE’s engineering abilities.

Until recently, one could tour the former LTTE leader Prabhakaran’s house and bunker. There is yet no sign off the main highway indicating where one should turn to visit Prabhakaran’s house, but many of these side roads are swarming with military officials who happily point travelers in the right direction (Figure 9). Reaching the house and the large surrounding area, which is now attached to an army camp in which soldiers are seen jogging or milling about, there stands a signboard where a familiar argument is made about the nature of the LTTE:

This two-storied underground bunker was constructed with concrete to the length of 40 feet, to the height of 15 feet and to the breadth of 38 feet. The outer walls are 4.5 feet and inner walls are 2.5 feet in thickness respectively. The doors are made of bullet proof steel and can be locked inside. LTTE leader and his family were lived [sic] in this air-conditioned underground bunker leading a luxurious life with all the facilities. It was equipped with a natural ventilation system and also an artificial oxygen tanks [sic] were installed to use in an emergency situation.

Inside the LTTE leader’s house, a similar narrative to the one made at the Kilinochchi water tank is put forth: the LTTE and its leadership were only interested in saving themselves and had



Fig. 8. “Terrorist swimming pool” just south off the main highway in Visuvmadu. (Amarasingam).



Fig. 9. LTTE Leader Velupillai Prabhakaran’s bunker in Visuvmadu. (Amarasingam).

little regard for Tamil civilians and their plight (indeed, it was only the Sri Lankan Government that cared for them). On one wall of the house, the government has put up a series of poor photos depicting child soldiers and their ruined childhoods, with a sign that reads “fate of Tamil civilians.” These pictures show children who appear to be hungry, others holding weapons, and some in the midst of training or battle. On the opposite wall of the house, there are another series of pictures underneath a sign that reads “LTTE leader’s luxurious family life” – some depict Prabhakaran and his wife standing with his children in school uniforms, his family celebrating their children’s birthday, Prabhakaran relaxing in a swimming pool, and his son,

Balachandran, riding on his toy car (with a statement above which reads “only my children can play”) (Figure 10). Juxtaposed with the wall of photos depicting child soldiers, the argument is clear: the LTTE was holding civilians “hostage” for their own selfish ends, while the leadership and their families were living in the lap of luxury.

One moves from room to room: Prabhakaran’s bedroom where a shirt and sarong hang; another bedroom that holds what is apparently Prabhakaran’s insulin cooler, plus an office with a desk and chair (Figure 11). Coming back up to ground level, one is met by a smiling Sri Lankan soldier who asks whether we enjoyed our time there and directs us to visit the “museum” portion of the site (where visitors are later asked to donate some money). In front of the museum sits the toy car of Prabhakaran’s son, Balachandran. Inside the building are numerous LTTE weapons and paraphernalia: suicide bomber vests, claymore mines, hand grenades, LTTE uniform material, cyanide capsules, and even the ceremonial kit that includes an LTTE flag, given to the families of fallen cadres/fighters killed during the conflict. The site depicts a “terrorist” organization, the LTTE, which posed a real threat to Sri Lanka, judging by the weapons on display. The messaging is clear: the Sri Lankan armed forces should be celebrated for their victory over such a formidable foe, and Tamil civilians long suffered under the LTTE until the “humanitarian operation” of 2009, during which they were saved from the clutches of a ruthless rebel outfit.

While Prabhakaran’s bunkers in PTK and Visuvamadu were major tourist sites when the authors visited in 2012 and 2013, they have now been destroyed. According to the military, tourism was only a “temporary phenomenon,” and now that the area has been de-mined, there was no reason to keep alive the “ghosts of terrorism” (BBC 2013). The official government reason for the destruction of these sites seems somewhat suspect. For one, it is unclear why the government thought these sites were safe for tourists if they were still *heavily mined*.

Driving east and south from Visuvamadu to Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK), one enters the main theater of the war between January and May 2009. The authors find the Government’s decision to build a war museum and a huge victory monument in PTK to smack of insensitivity, given the tens of thousands of people killed just kilometers away (Figure 12). The museum houses numerous weapons captured from the LTTE, including machine guns and ships, which are



Fig. 10. The Sri Lankan government’s propaganda materials inside Prabhakaran’s bunker. (Amarasingam).



Fig. 11. Prabhakaran's underground bedroom, with insular cooler, and chair. (Amarasingam).



Fig. 12. Victory monument in PTK, next to the war museum. (Amarasingam).

openly on display (Figure 13). While many of these seem of questionable utility in battle, one could argue that the museum is the clearest attempt to showcase the firepower as a “real threat” posed by the LTTE in a way that not only valorizes the Sri Lankan armed forces but serves as a reminder that a similar threat could reemerge if the country and its leaders are not careful. That is to say, certain civil liberties may need to be sacrificed for the sake of national security, and the military presence in the North and East of the country is justified. This pre-emptive nationalistic tactic has been used to concentrate sweeping powers in the hands of the Rajapaksa family (David 2013; Kadirgamar, 2013).



Fig. 13. Captured LTTE weapons and ships at the war museum in PTK. (Amarasingam).

Conclusion

Military hostilities in Sri Lanka may have ended in May 2009, but war continues by other means. Sinhala nationalism, combined with ardent militarization of the North and East of the country, continues to infiltrate the everyday lives of those who survived the war. War tourism is but one expression of the triumphalist nationalism and memorialization that pervades the country. Our discussion of the current landscape of memory and the “war tourism” trail in Northern Sri Lanka exposes the persistence of a triumphalist Sinhala nationalism, embodied in national victory monuments, but especially in constructing the LTTE as “terrorists” (but formidable opponents) who selfishly lived the good life (but ruined the lives of Tamil civilians). The ways in which the artifacts of war are narrated – the fallen water tank, Prabhakaran’s pool, and his children’s toys – are not surprising nor are they subtle. They align perfectly with the dictatorial tendencies of the Sinhala nationalism practiced by the Rajapaksa government (Amarasingam 2014; David 2013; Gunasekera 2013; Saravanamuttu 2013).

The Government’s choice of which LTTE sites and monuments are kept and which ones destroyed selectively constructs public remembering of the war in post-war Sri Lanka. Memorialization of the more than 40,000 people killed in the 2009 fighting is nowhere to be seen and is in fact actively curtailed (Aneez and Sirilal 2014). The military’s increased presence in civilian life, as well as continued land grabs in the North and a worrisome decline of media freedom in the country, speaks to the ongoing issues facing those living in the North in the post-war context. Public acts of remembering war and “the enemy” LTTE, such as those featured above, are powerful icons that produce fear and the threat of insecurity against which the Sri Lankan state can further militarize civilian spaces.

Short Biographies

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Note

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