

TAMIL TIGERS

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This paper takes you through the rise and fall of one of the most powerful terrorist organizations to have ever been formed: The Tamil Tigers. The Tamil Tigers were based in Sri Lanka and owned their own army, navy, and air force. Their fierce leader (Velupillai Prabhakaran) had a goal to give his people independence, but his never ending lust for power would lead to the group's downfall.

Velupillai Prabhakaran, later referred to by his Tamil nickname “Thamby” (which means “Little Brother”), was born on November 26, 1954 in the small coastal village of Velvettithurai in Sri Lanka. He was the youngest of four children. In his younger years, he was described as a shy student. Even though his father hated the Tamil politics, Prabhakaran became involved in activism at a young age after becoming angered by what he saw as discrimination against the Tamil people by Sri Lanka’s majority Sinhalese population. In one of only a few known interviews, Prabhakaran stated he was influenced by the lives of two Indian leaders: Subhash Chandra Bose (1897-1945) and Bhagat Singh (1907-1931), both of whom took part in the armed struggle for independence against the British that lasted from 1857 until 1947. He was equally intrigued by the lives and works of Alexander the Great and Napoleon, stating that he had studied and read many books on the two leaders.¹ His goal was to get Tamil Eelam recognized as a nation. To his enemies,

1. “Obituary: Velupillai Prabhakaran,” *BBC News*, modified May 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7885473.stm

he was a secretive man who had no regard for human life; Prabhakaran was a ruthless terrorist who pioneered the use of suicide bombings, brutally annihilated his own Tamil critics, and refused every compromise or treaty that was thrown in his direction that might have led to peace.

During an interview conducted in 1994, Prabhakaran recollected that, when he was in the eighth grade, he had an English teacher who encouraged students to take up arms against the military. “[The English teacher] . . . impressed upon me the need for armed struggle and persuaded me to put my trust in it.”² In 1969, at the age of 15, he joined the Thangathurai-Kuttimani militant group and gradually developed into a leader through his bravery and dedication. Two years later, Prabhakaran founded the Tamil New Tigers (TNT). The group was composed of a dozen close associates he would later lead on a bomb attack at a carnival in Jaffna, the key Tamil city in the northern part of Sri Lanka (September 1972). However, most consider the founding of the TNT to have begun in 1975, with the assassination of the mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duriappah.

Prabhakaran spent hours upon hours developing and shaping the Tamil New Tigers. Influenced by the previously mentioned Subhash Chandra Bose and the practices of Prabhakaran’s father, he had a very strict code of conduct for his group. Members of his group were to abstain from alcohol and tobacco; they were also expected to dedicate their lives to the Tamil race. They decided to call themselves Tigers because the Tiger was the emblem of the Chola dynasty who established one of the longest-ruling empires in history across South India and Sri Lanka from the 300s BCE-1279 CE.³ In 1976, Prabhakaran renamed his group to The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Initially he believed that members should not marry; in fact, he took a vow of chastity. However, in 1983 he married Mathivathani Erambu, a student at that time; they later went on to have three children. Tamil Tigers are now allowed to marry, but only after five years of service in the military.⁴

2. Jyoti Thottam, “Prabhakaran: The Life and Death of a Tiger,” *Time*, May 19, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1899590-1,00.html>

3. T. Sabaratnam, *Pirapaharan*, retrieved November 27, 2018, <https://www.sangam.org/Sabaratnam/PirapaharanChap6.htm>

4. Jerome Taylor, “Velupillai Prabhakaran: Leader of the Tamil Tigers,” *The Independent*, May 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/velupillai-prabhakaran-leader-of-the-tamil-tigers-1687239.html>

Velupillai Prabhakaran made it very clear from the beginning that he was going to be a ruthless leader who did not mind sacrificing the lives of others, including civilians, for his greater cause. To his followers who would follow him to his death, he was a freedom fighter who fought for the autonomy of the Tamil people. To the millions of Tamils scattered across the earth who would generously donate to his cause, he was a hero. Prabhakaran was viewed as the only person capable of defending them from Sri Lanka's mostly Sinhalese government and their foreign-funded army, who had violated numerous human rights against the Tamils. He was a brilliant military strategist, and with the use of suicide bombings, he could keep the Sri Lankan Army at bay for several years with little more than assault rifles.⁵

Prabhakaran's objectives were straightforward when he drafted the constitution for the Tamil Tigers. As adapted from his objectives:

- Total independence of Tamil Eelam.
- The establishment of a sovereign, socialist democratic people's government.
- . . .
- Establishment of a socialist mode of production.
- Uphold armed revolutionary struggle; an extension of the political struggle for liberation.
- Guerrilla warfare will be gradually and systematically transformed into a genuine people's war of liberation.⁶

The LTTE leadership was split along a two-tier structure: the military and the political division. Overseeing both of these divisions was a central governing committee headed by Prabhakaran himself. Prabhakaran would direct and control the subdivisions of the group, which included their navy (the Sea Tigers), air force (the Air Tigers), suicide unit (the Black Tigers), and the political office. His roles were Chairman of the Central Governing Committee and Commander-in-Chief of the Tamil's army.

5. Taylor, "Velupillai Prabhakaran."

6. T. Sabaratnam, *Pirapaharan*, retrieved November 27, 2018, <https://www.sangam.org/Sabaratnam/PirapaharanChap9.htm>

Prabhakaran felt that both men and women should be given the opportunity to fight, and in 1983 the women's front was created. Later, in 1987, Prabhakaran set up the first training camp exclusively for women in Jaffna. He also thought that children should have the right to fight. In 1983, Prabhakaran set up a training base for recruits under the age of 16. In the early 2000s, it was estimated that as much as 60 percent of the LTTE consisted of fighters under the age of 18. These child soldiers were referred to as "Tiger Cubs."⁷

Always being outnumbered by the Sri Lankan Army, Prabhakaran would lead his forces in a series of guerrilla warfare actions against a range of targets. In 1983, his fame and prominence skyrocketed after he ambushed a patrol of the Sri Lankan Army outside of Jaffna, resulting in the deaths of 13 soldiers. This ambush later led to what is called Black July. Over the span of 7 days, many riots and attacks against the Tamil people occurred, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Tamil civilians. Many Tamils fled the country, while many Tamil youths joined the militant group. Prabhakaran said, "The '83 July holocaust has united all sections of the Tamil masses."⁸ The Sri Lankan people later came to fear the month of July as the LTTE commemorated this attack with bombings and assassinations. This event is also widely considered the start of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

After seeing the successful attack of two suicide bombers in 1983 on the U.S. Marine base in Beirut, Prabhakaran began to encourage a culture of martyrdom among his followers. Long before Islamic jihadists realized the effectiveness of suicide bombs, the LTTE used them as a common form of attack. Often these attacks were against civilians.⁹ A few years later, in July of 1987, Prabhakaran decided to try and model an attack after the Beirut suicide truck assassination. The very first Tamil Tiger suicide attack was made by a Sri Lankan member of the LTTE, under the *nom de guerre* of Captain Miller, who drove a truck into a barracks of Sinhalese army troops who were sleeping. To encourage and recruit more suicide bombers,

7. "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," *South Asia Terrorism Portal* (SATP), retrieved February 2017. <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/terroristoutfits/Ltte.htm>

8. Thottam, "Prabhakaran: The Life and Death of a Tiger."

9. Taylor, "Velupillai Prabhakaran: Leader of the Tamil Tigers."

Prabhakaran decided to make a large political display in the Tamil homelands of Captain Miller. In 1987, he erected a statue of the captain and displayed it with pride in Jaffna.¹⁰ Prabhakaran would also appear in public every November to honor those who were killed in battle or in suicide missions. Even with these attacks and suicide bombings, Prabhakaran did not consider himself a terrorist. Through all of these killings, his intent was to receive political gain. In 1993, the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the third president of Sri Lanka from 1989-1993, was the only time a suicide attack had killed a sitting president.¹¹

Being aware of the influence of European human rights non-governmental organizations, Prabhakaran enlisted their assistance to show the LTTE's war against the Sri Lankan government as an ethnic conflict between Sinhala and Tamil. With the backing of the Norwegian government, Prabhakaran declared a ceasefire in 2001 and began showing his desire to work out a "comprehensive and just peace."¹² With the ceasefire in effect, Prabhakaran secretly demanded his top commanders return to the heart of LTTE territory and told them they were to prepare their men militarily to launch a new war in five years' time. During the ceasefire period of 2002-2006, Prabhakaran, through his military power and popularity among the Tamil people, emerged as a ruler of almost a third of the Sri Lankan coast and a fourth of the country's land. Prabhakaran would often mention democracy to gain support from the West, but it was never something he was intent on. By the time the 2005 presidential elections came around, the focus of the LTTE was gaining parity with the Sri Lankan military.¹³

The tide started to turn against Prabhakaran in large part because of a poll boycott he enforced to keep a pro-peace candidate out of office. Despite this campaign from Prabhakaran, President Mahinda Rajapaksa

10. Robert Pape, "Tamil Tigers: Suicide Bombing Innovators," *National Public Radio*, May 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104391493>

11. Pape, "Tamil Tigers."

12. M.D. Nalapat, "Why the Tamil Tigers Lost Ealem and How Sri Lanka Won the War," *Jewish Institute for National Security of America*, March 2011, <http://www.jinsa.org/publications/global-briefing/defeating-terrorism-why-tamil-tigers-lost-eelamand-how-sri-lanka-won-wa>

13. Nalapat, "Why the Tamil Tigers Lost Ealem."

(2005-2015) narrowly won and made it his goal to defeat Prabhakaran and bring unity to Sri Lanka. Prabhakaran made some dire mistakes. His continual lust for more land and legal recognition for an Independent Tamil Eelam weakened his forces. It didn't help that Prabhakaran was always suspicious of his people, even his closest commanders. This lack of trust led to him killing many of his own commanders, eventually leading to one of his commanders breaking off from the Tamil Tigers in fear of his own life. It is said that his personal dictatorship and refusal to listen to anyone close to him discouraged his LTTE commanders and led to a few surrendering to the government.¹⁴

Prabhakaran led one of the most successful terrorist groups. What started as a couple dozen friends would eventually rise upwards of 15,000 members in his military, including an army, navy, and air force. Although he was very quiet and secretive, Prabhakaran was a brilliant military strategist; his methods would be used as a guide for future terrorist groups. In most terrorist organizations, the leader is just a figurehead and when he is killed another one is chosen in his place. Prabhakaran was more than a figurehead; he was the founder and dictator of the LTTE. He meant so much to his group that, after his death, the LTTE was essentially destroyed.

Prabhakaran fought for the Tamil people, giving them an opportunity to stand up to those who were oppressing them. He showed his people courage and taught them to follow their goals and to never fear. His biggest goal was to unite a race of people that had been oppressed for years. While he had some success doing this, he also drove some Tamil people out of the country because of his bloody campaign. He gave them hope for a better world, but in the end, his lack of trust of his closest friends and excessive acts of violence against anyone who opposed him, including Tamils, led to the leader's downfall and eventual death. After being chased by the Sri Lankan Army for a few days, Prabhakaran would not allow himself to be taken alive and on May 19, 2009, he was killed in a firefight by the Sri Lankan Army.

Many believe terrorists have two goals in mind: to kill people and to gain power. Prabhakaran, however, may have sincerely wanted his people

14. Nalapat, "Why the Tamil Tigers Lost Eelam."

to receive equal rights with the Sinhalese and to stop being oppressed by the Sri Lankan government. His goals were different from the terrorist groups who attack the West. He never attacked outside of Sri Lanka and always knew there were outside forces at play hindering his movement. Prabhakaran was a powerful terrorist leader and could have become a powerful president had he not made those few critical errors. As opposed to other terrorist organizations who have little support outside of their group, the Tamil Tigers were supported by most of the Tamil people as evidenced by his narrow defeat in the 2005 presidential election. Prabhakaran was followed closely because of his dedication to his members and his willingness to show his love for them. He changed the country of Sri Lanka for decades and has left a legacy behind him.

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