



# **The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers**

*Gordon Weiss*

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"An incisive first account of the formation, history, and bloody dissolution of the rebel Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka."

"An excellent account . . . scrupulously fair."--"The Economist"

"This shattering, heart-breaking tale of savagery and suffering not only lifts the veil that conceals one of the most awful tragedies of the current era, but also helps us understand what should be done, not just in this sad and beautiful land, but long before other such horrors spiral out of control." --Noam Chomsky, institute professor and professor of linguistics, MIT, and author of "Hopes and Prospects"

In the final days of the thirty-year Sri Lankan civil war, perhaps tens of thousands of civilians were killed as government forces hemmed in the last remaining Tamil Tiger rebels on a tiny sand-spit, dubbed "The Cage." Gordon Weiss, a journalist on the scene as the UN spokesman in Sri Lanka, pulls back the curtain of government misinformation to tell the full story for the first time.

Tracing the role of foreign influence as it converged with a history of radical Buddhism and ethnic conflict, "The Cage" is a harrowing portrait of the root causes and catastrophic consequences of a revolutionary uprising caught in the crossfire of international power jockeying. As Weiss relates the tale of an island paradise torn apart by war, he raises critical questions: Were war crimes committed? Was this the Obama administration's first "human rights failure" (as suggested by "Time" magazine)? Does China's central role in the Sri Lankan government's victory sound a warning for democratic progress?

Gordon Weiss has lived in New York and worked in numerous conflict and natural disaster zones including Bosnia, Afghanistan, Darfur, and Haiti. Employed by the United Nations for over twelve years, he is now a visiting scholar at Sydney University and a correspondent for Australia's "Global Mail."

## The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers Details

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# **From Reader Review *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* for online ebook**

## **Anandraj R says**

Heart wrenching book!

Very sad account on how Tamils have suffered at the hands of Sinhalese, Army & Tamil Tigers.

The fag end of the war is described as one of the bloodiest in history & what's more saddening is d pathetic & hopeless condition of the Tamil population even after the war!

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## **Siria says**

At heart, I don't think Gordon Weiss is a long form writer. He was formerly a UN official, and the prose and structure of *The Cage* seems to show someone who more naturally writes briefing papers than full-length books. Although *The Cage* is a short 230 pages, at times I felt it could have been edited down further still (and benefited from another editorial pass because of some occasionally clunky phrasing). These quibbles aside, I think this is well worth the read: Weiss details the last stages of the civil war in Sri Lanka, a conflict which was largely ignored or dismissed by the international community. It's a pretty damning indictment of all sides involved, and a lament for the fact that those responsible for so much pain and suffering will probably never be held accountable. Not an easy read but a worthwhile one.

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## **Larry Bassett says**

### **Excellent resource**

My daughter just moved to Sri Lanka to teach English for the next year as a Fulbright scholar. This is a book that I read to learn a little bit about The recent history of Sri Lanka.

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## **Harmeet says**

It delves into Sri Lanka, a buddhist nation that has had one of the most violent and longest civil wars. It details the historical context, end of LTTE and the purported outcome - brutal victory, little reconciliation, iron grip with strong security forces controlled by few.

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## **Nithya says**

Never knew something of this sort has been written and published from Canberra. And author seems to be a professor in University of Sydney. Very well, at the least I have come to know about it now, and read it.

Exceptional and a balanced book about 2009 war SL war. None in the market does justice to the SL war as this book, even the Samanth Subramaniam's is kind of travelogue. Solid introduction, about the reasons behind the Sinhalese Chauvinism. Starts as early as Henry Olcott, to Angarika Damapala, and their Buddhist politics. None of the other books, deals with this part of history to a great extent. Infact, I found this book, when I was searching for writings of Damapala's, and the case which was fought by him in India for Buddha gaya. I am yet to set my foot on the reference sections.

You will understand the book better, and may end up seeing this book, along with the information provided there on, and whole SL war, from a very different angle, if you even have a slightest know how of Buddhist politics and its system that ran the country, before raise of Bhakti movement back home.

History of Tigers, their violence, and the poor SL Tamils, caught between Devil, another Devil and deep sea. My heart goes out for them. There were times, when my father use to write short stories for Ceylon radio station along with the tamil songs. He still preserves those letters of appreciation, and his pen friend's letters from Jaffna. With so many SL tamil friends in Sydney, and their affection towards my country's culture, I think we had let them down, with our disastrous foreign policy.

From now on, Tamil and it's people would share the same fate as the Jaffna library. Physically available, but contextually absent. Go for this book, to the least to gets some facts straight on Tamil Tigers and their marxist origins, but the irony there is, they chased all Muslim from North of Sri Lanka, which were under their control, away, so that only temple bells could be heard there on. Me and my wry humor.

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### **Tara says**

I read this while traveling through Sri Lanka and while it doesn't paint a pretty picture of the country, it was helpful to get some background information about the civil war that took place there. The first few chapters give you a good idea of the country's history, from the origins of the Sinhalese and Tamil cultures in Sri Lanka, to the more recent political events that fueled the war. The author also does a great job of gathering accounts from people who lived through the war, lending the book some nice narratives that are a break from the more analytical parts of the book. I think he also seems quite fair, not labeling any one group the "good guys" or "bad guys" (though he does come down pretty hard on the family that's currently in power). I would recommend this book to anyone traveling to Sri Lanka or anyone who would like to better understand the horrible war that took place there.

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### **Mayuran says**

This is a great read, Not just because it has given a good insight about what happened in those horrid days but also for the style of narration. It goes in a rapid pace and writer keeps your interest throughout. He also backs his claims with good evidence.

In terms of plot I am a sri-lankan and Tamil, precedence here is important. It is clear that certain power in sri-lanka doesn't care whether it is Tamil, sinhalish or any other ethnicity, the people in power want to enjoy the power and they are happy to do any thing for that.

It can be seen even during JVP time people in power did not have any humanitarian consideration in

slaughtering people. What annoys me is that this power hunger has been fabricated as ethnic war and using one ethnic's struggle to repress the other. i.e Now people in power are using name of LTTE to repress the rest of the community.

Anyway I got carried away with my patriotism but over all books is an enjoyable read if you have the patience to go through the first chapter as that talks lot about history. I enjoyed that but some might find that not very interesting.

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### **Jim Rimmer says**

Weiss' book delves deeply into one of the filthiest of all the 'dirty little wars'. One would have to be heartless not to be challenged by the level of detail and analysis within the reportage, but even more so by the reprehensible culpability of action and inaction at various times across the history of this conflict.

There are two types of reader I would recommend The Cage to:

- 1) Those who know, because they're unlikely to know this much, and
- 2) Those who don't, because they really should.

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### **Dennis Dason says**

Although I bought the book months before, I was waiting to read the book from the appropriate place - My Home, where I can feel as a Thamizh.

Before moving further, I make sure that even though I have very deep sympathy towards the Sri Lankan Tamizhs and their cause of Eelam, I don't have any soft corner for LTTE and their Ego.

For people who haven't had a chance to know the core issue like me, this book provides a detailed account of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. And the great thing that surprised me on this book is its neutrality. It's also propaganda free and unbiased - which gives a very reliable account of the war, tearing the masks of both Sri Lankan Government and LTTE alike. It is easily understood that only because of its neutrality, politicians of Tamil Nadu didn't even utter a single word about this book which is written by an UN Observer, even though it pictured the grotesque face of Sri Lankan Government.

5 out of 5 for its Neutrality.

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### **Shaun says**

Essential reading for anyone studying The causes and final stages of the Sri Lankan conflict. Extremely well

written 'The Cage' provides a compelling insight on the factors that would sow the seeds of insurrection and the policies of successive governments that would ultimately bring on it's bloody end.

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## **Steven Fake says**

A solid introduction to the end of the conflict and the background. A damning indictment of the Rajapaksa government. The army continues after the end of the conflict and demise of the LTTE to control the economy of Tamil areas and to change the demography. book was blurbed by everyone from Noam Chomsky to Gareth Evans and Jon Lee Anderson

Notes:

xxiii the way the Rajapaksa government rejected international investigation after the war and commissioned its own domestic inquiry to deflect international accountability is very reminiscent of Israeli strategies

xxiv anti-Tamil riots in 1983 government orchestrated pogrom known as Black July killed several thousands and led to widespread emigration and growth of the Tamil Tigers

xxv Sri Lanka has right-wing monks (whom politicians pay homage to) with nationalistic claims to the land as Sinhalese based on obscure ancient Buddhist texts - again just like Israel

ICRC, Int'l Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts - the report observes that the global response to terrorism has boosted the government use of terror

plantation tamils suffer worst of all but have a quite separate story

Burgher community - mixed European and Sri Lankan ancestry

4 China armed the Sri Lankan gov't

5-6 tragic assassination of Lasantha Wickrematunge who foretold his own death

7 Tigers had history's only instance of an insurgent air force

9 nothing has changed in the situation for tamils that lead to the birth of the Tigers

12 "...Sri Lanka can usefully be compared with Israel, another modern nation state that embraces two major ethnic groups while rejecting the full occupancy rights of one."

Ancient religious monuments are given ideologically driven useful meaning by modern governments. some 2000 Vedda people are the remaining indigenous inhabitants of Sri Lanka

14 "...the Mahavamsa is cited as literal evidence for the Sinhalese claim to the whole island as a matter of historical record and right. .... Just as the Old Testament is treated as the literal command of God and an immutable force of nature by Zionist nationalists to dislodge the claims of others, so the Mahavamsa is deemed to be the literal transmission of the Buddha's will."

16 the British in the 19th Century were the ones to unearth the Mahavamsa and to interpret it as signifying Sinhalese historical claims to the entire island. "...the Sinhalese were hailed as a kind of lost civilization, an

Aryan outpost dangling from the dark Dravidian underbelly of India.”

17 it was only after a ruinous coffee blight that Britain transformed Sri Lanka into a world famous tea exporting nation using tamil tea pickers in bonded labor

18 tamils and sinhalese had lived side by side for 2,000 years with little record of specifically ethnic or religious conflict and much fusion

19 through the British Tamils came to occupy a class of highly educated professionals in the 19th and 20th centuries and were resented similar to the jews in europe

22 there were attempts (notably by Dharmapala) to link the Sinhalese to Aryan lineages

26 fatal weaknesses in the tamil cause due to the division between the eastern indian tamils and the norther sri lankan tamils

28 there was Sinhalese admiration in some quarters for Hitler in his era

32 1956 saw passage of anti-tamil legislation and mobs killed hundreds

35 the late 1980s witnessed brutal government repression (killing tens of thousands) of a Sinhalese youth Marxist movement

40 this violent suppression of the JVP was supported with arms by the US among others

41 circa 1972 Ceylon was rebranded Sri Lanka and various Buddhist signifiers were introduced, the renaming seems to have been an exclusionary religious-ethnic-nationalist move

43 tamils were driven out of education and civil administration in the late ‘50s and following decades

46-48 Black July details

49 the civil war with the LTTE was really sparked by Black July

57 1987 marked first use by Tigers of a spectacular suicide attack

66 Prabakaran was a fan of Phantom comics and Clint Eastwood movies as a boy

67 PLO trained some tigers in the late ‘70s

72 government was always far more deadly against civilians than the Tigers

88 tall palmyra trees, the symbol of Tamil Nadu in India

89 government bombed hospitals in violation of laws of war in its 2009 final assault on the LTTE

91 “Just as in Israel, where Israeli children no longer speak Arabic and have never met a Palestinian, conflict had entailed a total separation of nationalities.”

Sri Lankan gov’t told UN staff they were “unable to guarantee the safety” of their staff



98 The LTTE placed guns close to hospitals, quite possibly to intentionally draw fire to the hospitals

103 government artillery fire was striking UN positions despite repeated coordinates being given to them - just like Israel!

104 many civilians died from this shelling who had thought they'd be safer near the UN

107 in 2006 the government struck an LTTE school full of schoolgirls killing some 60 girls

108 government argued it was a LTTE training camp

114 government explained it bombed the hospital because it believed the LTTE leadership to be there. HRW: "Repeated Sri Lankan artillery attacks striking known hospitals is evidence of war crimes."

115 Weiss on whether hospitals retain special protection under international law when used to commit hostile acts: "The key determinant then is whether the anticipated advantage of destroying that capability outweighs the magnitude of the wrong committed when one kills civilians and medical staff, or fighters who are hors de combat because of their wounds. .... A hospital is, in effect, innocent until proven guilty." There was no evidence senior Tiger leaders were at the PTK hospital or that it was an artillery base.

116 The Tigers certainly did use civilians as human shields and the Sri Lankan government justified attacks on civilian targets on such grounds. Those who would defend Israel on this basis must also defend the Rajapaksa government, which had a far stronger case against the Tigers.

117 The Sri Lankan military had for several years drove civilians from the front lines through the use of "warning bombardments" which themselves frequently resulted in civilian casualties to compel them to flee.... so reminiscent of Israel's door knocking bombs

120 ICRC notoriously visited concentration camps in WWII and delegates failed to warn the world of any horrors they might have witnessed

123 China Russia and India all blocked UN action to restrain Sri Lanka tho China on the SC was most significant

124 the Tigers also used heavy artillery against areas with civilian concentrations

255n25 "Traditional Sinhalese customs of polyandry, polygamy, easy divorce, several marriages in a lifetime... conflicted with [Victorian British notions]"

280n8 Americans widely used declaration of 'free-fire zone' tactic in Vietnam and used it again on Fallujah in Nov 2004. the tactic contravenes customary international law which requires positive identification of combatants

280n9 proportionality see Rule 14 of ICRC compendium of customary international humanitarian law

297n12 Sri Lanka also used drones over the battlefield, the author calls them "a constant menacing presence, even without the capacity to fire missiles at targets."

137 international journalists were largely relegated to their hotel rooms

143 the Sri Lankan gov't convened its own commission of inquiry post-war to prevent an international inquiry

149 By 2010 there was wave of murders of street beggars reminiscent of Latin America in the dirty years

155 Sri Lankan 'terrorism experts' paraded around on television to explain the Tamil Tigers in coordination with Sri Lankan diplomats to buttress the government narrative of the conflict

167 in Deuteronomy there are injunctions against the cutting of enemy fruit trees

169 the SLA drone fleet was obtained from Israel

170 the final 16 week siege of the Tiger held areas resulted in 10,000 to 40,000 dead. the size of the invading forces were similar to Cast Lead, though the SLA siege was far more lethal

173 SLA restrictions of UN and Red Cross personnel

174 Sri Lankan gov't blamed all civilian casualties on the Tigers, just like Israel

179 US moved post-war to increase support to Sri Lanka

191 oblique reference to Jai Lalaitha and her political opportunism re: Sri Lanka's tamils

201 the author called the defeat of the Tigers "The extinction of Tamil hopes for political and social equality..."

204 SLA strikes on hospitals

220 The Sri Lankan gov't continues to operate death squads that leave dissidents in mortal fear. A Sinhalese supremacist ideology prevails.

225 in the post-war era the Tamil area has been broken up and populated with army camps, "It is ethnic cleansing of the Israeli rather than the Yugoslav variety..."

226 "The prospects for a majority of Sri Lanka's Tamils do not look good."

227 Walzer Just and Unjust Wars, "the revolutionary reveals his freedom in the same way as he earns it, by directly confronting his enemies and refraining from attacks on anyone else."

227-8 the government is committed to the "complete subjugation of the Tamil population by force and an intention to sustain a grip over this restive group through terror and ethnic cleansing."

229 US is worried about 'losing' Sri Lanka to China and has therefore continued to attempt to curry favor

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## **T-bone says**

It's shocking that this happened and barely an international eyelid has been raised. Hardly anyone seems to

even know about it. And so the Australian govt goes on imprisoning Tamil asylum seekers and the Australian and Sri Lankan cricket teams go on playing games. So it goes.

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### **Kusal Perera says**

Quite a revealing narration on the SL war that rolled out as one without witnesses. For most who would not want to accept the ground truth, Weiss would be a "Western Traitor". Yet reading through his book on the war and how it was organised by the SL regime, there is no doubt it was ruthless, brutal and was waged with very little concern about the ordinary civilian.

As most foreigners do, Weiss has also faulted in recording and interpreting the pre war history in many instances, but they don't necessarily intrude or impact negatively on what happened during the last few months of the war that left a human tragedy on the soils of SL.

For just that, it should be read by those who are not familiar with the last phase of the SL war waged without witnesses, but had left enough evidence.

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### **Murtaza says**

Before their stunning defeat in 2009, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were one of the most legendary militant organizations in contemporary history. Their mystique, built in part on their global diaspora network, their fearsome military capabilities (they also pioneered the tactic of suicide bombing) and their seeming invincibility made them one of the most successful insurgent groups on earth. The fiefdom they established, a nascent homeland for the Tamil people in Northern Sri Lanka, was governed like a state of its own. The group maintained not only a small airforce but a formidable merchant navy (the Sea Tigers) and an advanced special forces capability (the Black Tigers). It also extended its reach across the planet, into organized crime and legitimate businesses around the world.

The sudden collapse and total vanquishment of the Tigers in 2009 was shocking in a number of ways. The Tamil diaspora, engorged thanks to years of conflict and oppression by the Sri Lankan government, mobilized as best it could to engender an international intervention which never came. Legendary, elusive figures like Prabhakaran, Pottu Amman, Soosai, Nadesan and other top Tamil Tiger figures were drawn out and killed in the last days, as the group made a futile last stand against the Sri Lankan army.

As the author documents well, the brutality of the conflict was in many ways an extension of the way post-independence Sri Lanka had learned to deal with such issues. Sinhalese-Marxist uprisings by the JVP had been brutally put down, perhaps even more brutally, in intervening decades, and the ultimate fate of the Tigers was the same. Today Sri Lanka has become enthralled with a militant, political Buddhism the seeds of which had been sown decades earlier, and which now has the state in its thrall, expressed through government monks and the ruling oligarchy of the Rajapaksa brothers.

This is one of my favorite types of non-fiction books: grippingly written yet non-narrative in structure, and filling in the blanks of an immensely-important yet little documented recent episode in history. It can drag a bit at times, focusing too much on the UN response (the author was a UN observer) but at other points is absolutely enthralling and brilliantly written. Recommended.

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