VOLUME 23 NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 2021

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Genocide Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgr20

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To cite this article: Jacob Wiebel (2021): Atrocities in Revolutionary Ethiopia, 1974-79: Towards a Comparative Analysis, Journal of Genocide Research, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2021.1992928

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1992928

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Published online: 28 Oct 2021.

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JOURNAL OF GENOCIDE RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1992928

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FORUM: MASS ATROCITIES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA

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Atrocities in Revolutionary Ethiopia, 1974-79: Towards a Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 resulted in the establishment of a military regime, the Derg, that oversaw and orchestrated numerous atrocities during its seventeen years in power. Some of these were part of the "Red Terror" that violently repressed all urban opposition, whereas others were associated with counter-insurgency measures against rural guerrillas. While a new generation of scholars is re-evaluating the history and legacies of the Ethiopian revolution, the period's atrocities are yet to be adequately examined in relation to comparative and conceptual discussions on genocides and crimes against humanity. In pursuit of a greater integration of Ethiopian historiography with the field of genocide studies, this forum contribution examines three essential conditions and features of the Red Terror in critical dialogue with questions, methods, and insights developed in work on other case studies. It focuses on the dynamics of dehumanization, the role of a fear-filled "atrocity environment," and the evolution of new violence-facilitating organizational structures, arguing the need for a global history as well as for a comparative approach.

Ethiopia's unprecedented social and political revolution of 1974 promised to dismantle much of the structural and cultural violence on which the country's imperial order had been founded. That the revolutionary process would itself entail significant direct violence was soon understood, accepted, at times even celebrated by all revolutionary groups. The result was a network of rebellions, counter-insurgency operations, reigns of state terror and border wars that over the following seventeen years generated numerous crimes against humanity and cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

The first notable massacre following the revolution occurred on the night of 22 November 1974. Members of the Derg – the fractious and embattled military junta that had claimed state power just months before – assassinated 59 prominent members of the imperial family and of the ancièn regime.[1] This first high-profile atrocity was a harbinger

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[1] Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *Ein Prinz Aus Dem Hause David* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011), chap.1; Bahru Zewde, "The History of the Red Terror: Contexts and Consequences" in *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged*, ed. Kjetil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer, and Anemu Girmachew (Oxford: James Currey, 2009), 23; Andargachew Tiruneh,

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of things to come: lethal violence in response to political problems would remain a central feature of Derg rule until the regime was ousted in 1991. Later massacres carried out in the name of the revolution, however, tended to target recently formed, Marxist oppositional political groups and their suspected sympathizers rather than members or supporters of the imperial regime.

Major civil wars raged in the north of the country throughout the post-revolutionary years, with ultimately successful insurgencies fought by rebels that would dominate Ethiopia and Eritrea for decades from 1991: the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Tigray and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Eritrea. But the Derg was also forced into costly conflicts elsewhere. This included the long insurgency fought by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the armed confrontation in the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region, which escalated into a major inter-state war with Somalia – a major focal point of global attention in the Cold War – in 1977.

For many urban Ethiopians, however, it was through the infamous "Red Terror" propagated by the Derg in the late 1970s that systematic violence became a fact of post-revolutionary life.[2] The Red Terror was the military regime's response to the challenge posed by revolutionary groups and activists who resisted its control of the state and its claim to lead the revolution. Such resistance had become increasingly violent: in 1976, the most popular among the urban opposition groups, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), started assassinating Derg members and their civilian allies as part of an urban guerrilla struggle. The Red Terror, which enveloped much of urban Ethiopia between 1976 and 1978, brought an end to any overt urban opposition activity. This was achieved through tens of thousands of extrajudicial killings; the use of systematic torture; and a series of massacres, searches, orchestrated denunciation meetings, and abductions.[3] The repression was most intense and sustained in Addis Ababa,[4] but equally engulfed major cities including Asmara, Gondar, and Dessie, as well as a number of smaller provincial cities and towns, following its success in the capital by 1978.[5]

The Red Terror was notable – and brutally effective – due to the forms as well as the scale of its violence. Its violence was in turns public and covert, displaying a merciless severity while concealing its true scale. The bodies of the Terror's targets were frequently left on public display for days, bearing notices denouncing their "counter-revolutionary" status and guarded to prevent relatives from retrieving them. Conversely, nightly abductions and disappearances were commonplace, with victims tortured, murdered, and secretly buried in mass graves.[6] Public funerals and visible mourning for victims deemed "reactionaries" were prohibited.[7] Tens of thousands were tortured, often using the infamous technique known as *Wofe*

The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 77.

[2] Jacob Wiebel, "The Ethiopian Red Terror," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of African History* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Zewde, "The History of the Red Terror."

[3] Jacob Wiebel, "'Let the Red Terror Intensify': Political Violence, Governance and Society in Urban Ethiopia, 1976-78," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 1 (2015); Tadesse Simie Metekia, "Violence against and Using the Dead: Ethiopia's Dergue Cases," *Human Remains and Violence: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2018): 77-80.

[4] Wiebel, "Let the Red Terror Intensify."

[5] Mary Dines, "The Ethiopian "Red Terror" in *Behind the War in Eritrea*, ed. Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe, and Bereket Habte Selassie (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980).

[6] Metekia, "Violence Against and Using the Dead," 79.

[7] Donald R Katz, "Children's Revolution: A Bloodbath in Ethiopia," *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 3 (1978), 5.

Ilala. This involved the tying together of victims' hands and feet and their suspension from a horizontal pole, exposing body parts rich in nerve endings – palms, soles, genitals – for beatings with sticks, "gumare" whips or electric cables.[8] Victims' mouths were often stuffed with rags, only periodically removed to permit confessions that promised to end, pause, or lighten the pain. Other common experiences of torture included being burned with cigarettes and (particularly for female detainees) rape and other forms of sexual violence. Information gleaned from interrogations involving torture was bureaucratically processed to map local allegiances and to violently dismantle opposition networks.

In concert with the wider web of mass violence and civil war in post-revolutionary Ethiopia, the Red Terror bequeathed profound and lasting legacies to Ethiopian society and politics. Beyond its direct social and psychological impacts, state violence was a major push factor in the formation of the country's now sizeable permanent diaspora in North America and Europe.[9] Domestically it fed into the evolution of a surveillance state with local knowledge and coercive capacities that has few parallels anywhere in Africa.[10] Since the Terror largely targeted and eliminated the multi-ethnic groups that opposed the Derg, it also had the effect of leaving ethno-nationalist insurgencies as the only viable challenge to the military regime in the country.

As the other articles in this collection make clear, the widespread use of political violence in revolutionary Ethiopia was not by itself exceptional in the country's modern history. From this vantage point, we may question the claim of the prominent Derg official and defector Dawit Wolde Giorgis that the Red Terror represented "violence that has no parallel in Ethiopian history."[11] Indeed, the wealth of parallels, however partial or qualified, clearly play a role in explaining the genesis and continuing significance of the revolutionary era's mass violence. The reign of the Derg regime did, however, witness notable innovations in the organization, justification, and targets of mass violence. It also leveraged global contexts in unprecedented ways to fund and facilitate its atrocities, as the following pages will demonstrate.

To date, the history of the Red Terror has been tied to the wider literature on mass violence primarily from two perspectives: on the one hand, there have been studies that compared organized violence in Derg-ruled Ethiopia to that of other "classical" or late twentieth-century revolutions.[12] The most comprehensive among these, a comparison of Ethiopian and Cambodian experiences by Edward Kissi, has been developed in an earlier issue of this journal.[13] Such studies have examined the relation between revolution and mass violence, and in Kissi's monograph queried the applicability of the concept of genocide.[14]

[8] The technique was also used in Brazil, where it was known as the "parrots perch." Martha K Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros, and Philip G Zimbardo, *Violence Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51. The similarity in name suggests a connection. For a typical account of the method during the Red Terror, see Taddele Seyoum Teshale, *The Life History of an Ethiopian Refugee (1974-1991): Sojourn in the Fourth World* (Lewiston: Edward Millen Press, 1991), 43.

[9] Solomon Addis Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants in the United States in the Twentieth Century, 1900–2000* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2005).

[10] Jacob Wiebel and Samuel Andreas Admasie, "Rethinking the Ethiopian Red Terror: Approaches to Political Violence in Revolutionary Ethiopia," *Journal of African History* 60, no. 3 (2019).

[11] Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989).

[12] Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, C. 1960–1974* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014); Gebru Tareke, "The Red Terror in Ethiopia: A Historical Aberration," *Journal of Developing Societies* 24, no. 2 (2008) *Ein Prinz Aus Dem Hause David* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2011).

[13] Edward Kissi, "Rwanda, Ethiopia and Cambodia: Links, Faultlines and Complexities in a Comparative Study of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6, no. 1 (2004): 183–206.

Comparative questions concerning Ethiopia's revolutionary violence have also been probed, often by legal scholars, in relation to later transitional justice processes. Here, too, the question of whether this violence could be labelled as "genocide" has loomed large, this time in relation to the Red Terror trials led by a Special Prosecutor's Office from 1993. Due to the distinct definition of genocide in the Ethiopian penal code of 1957, perpetrators of mass violence and leading figures in the Derg, including its chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam, were tried for – and convicted on – charges of genocide.[15] This literature has shed light on hitherto under-examined aspects of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence that transpired in the course of the trials. It has also begun to insert the Ethiopian experience into wider discussions about genocide memory and transitional justice.[16]

Valuable as these studies are, their comparative analysis remains circumscribed by their scope and focus. To broaden the integration of Ethiopian historiography and wider discussions in the field of genocide studies, this article analyses essential conditions for the Red Terror and raises questions about its atrocities – including hitherto neglected ones about the role of sexual violence and the legacies of Ethiopian imperialism – that arise from the comparative record. It also highlights the need to pay closer attention to the global history that shaped and energized Ethiopia's Derg-era atrocities. There is a tendency to explain such violence in endogenous terms, as growing out of histories rooted solely within Ethiopia.[17] This won't do: violence in revolutionary Ethiopia was deeply embedded in global relations and exchanges. In fact, as will be argued below, part of the reason that comparisons to other instances of mass violence in the twentieth century resonate so strongly is that there were either direct connections or comparable entanglements in global systems of power and of intellectual and material exchange.

The Politics of Depersonalization

The violence organized by the Derg against its opponents evolved markedly over the first few years after the revolution. Early massacres, executions and assorted "revolutionary measures," such as house searches, arrests, and detentions, elicited lengthy commentary and official justification. In regime statements and government newspapers, victims were named, and their alleged crimes were carefully laid out. Following the execution of twenty-three youths in November 1976, for instance, the government dailies *Addis Zemen* and its English-language counterpart *The Ethiopian Herald* reported on their front pages that the targets had "belonged to the anarchist group calling itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party" and assured readers that their case had been

[14] Edward Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide in Ethiopia and Cambodia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).

[15] Yacob Haile-Mariam, "The Quest for Justice and Reconciliation: The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Ethiopian High Court," *Hastings International & Comparative Law Review* 22 (1998): 667–746; Kassahun Molla Yilma, "The Legal Characterization of Facts During the Red Terror in Ethiopia: Genocide, War Crimes, or Crimes against Humanity?" *International Annals of Criminology* 58, no. 2 (2020): 173–92; Kinkino Kia Legide, "The Facets of Transitional Justice Red Terror Mass Trials of Derg Officials in Post-1991 Ethiopia: Reassessing Its Achievements and Pitfalls," *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 1–33; Metekia, "Violence against and Using the Dead."

[16] Esp. Haile-Mariam, "The Quest for Justice and Reconciliation," See also Bridget Conley, *Memory from the Margins: Ethiopia's Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum* (Cham: Springer, 2019); Elias O. Opongo, "The Red Terror of the Derg Regime: Memorialization of Mass Killings in Ethiopia," in *Remembrance and Forgiveness: Global and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. Ajlina Karamehić-Muratović and Laura Kromják (London: Routledge, 2020): 63–72.

[17] Compare Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 88.

"thoroughly investigated, and various evidences were produced to prove the charges of murders, robberies, and anti-revolutionary crimes."[18]

By the time the radical wing of the Derg around Mengistu Haile Mariam had taken control of the junta a year later, launching the Red Terror and giving their followers "*netsa ermeja*" – carte blanche to carry out extra-judicial violence – such justifications were no longer given. Killings were carried out covertly at improvised interrogation sites or overtly on urban streets without being publicized or explained in print media or on the airwaves. Victims were no longer named. Instead, they were labelled and socially ostracized. This often occurred literally, through affixed placards denouncing them as reactionary enemies of the people. Frequently, they were denied medical attention and funeral rites. The repudiation of their social personhood, in other words, had become a common feature of the Red Terror.

While dehumanizing language and actions have been documented in a wide range of genocides, these clearly exist on a broad continuum. At one end of the spectrum are forms of collective framing through rhetoric and policies that are designed to socially impede and ostracize the target group. At the other extreme is the biological labelling of victims as animals, usually vermin, pests, or insects, or as diseases that need to be eliminated. Across the spectrum, the denial of protection and of citizenship rights alongside an attack on personal dignity and social ties reduces victims to what Giorgio Agamben has termed "bare life," a state of being bereft of a recognized standing within society.[19]

The radical othering of victims as an integral mechanism in processes of mass violence has been widely discussed in the field of genocide studies. The subject was raised incisively in Primo Levi's post-war reflections on the apparent loss of victims' humanity as a quotidian and enabling feature of the Holocaust.[20] It was then extensively debated in response to Hannah Arendt's arguments concerning the eradication of "human nature as such" in totalitarian systems.[21] For Arendt, the elimination of human individuality, independent thought and relational empathy were central goals of totalitarian regimes, and constituted an essential precondition for the mass violence that they organized.[22] Many scholars have since developed and nuanced this emphasis on the dehumanizing aspects of genocide. David Blatman contended that "without dehumanization, the [Nazi] murderers could not have committed their crimes."[23] Rowan Savage similarly described dehumanization as "a mechanism or strategy that allows genocide to occur."[24] Dehumanization, in his view, functions both as motivation and legitimation for mass violence, placing victims "outside the bounds of humanity and of human moral obligation."[25] Gregory Stanton, the President of Genocide Watch, included dehumanization in his list of "ten stages of genocide."[26]

[18] "For Murder, Counter-Revolutionary Crimes: Twenty-Three Anarchists Executed," *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 November 1976.
[19] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Il Potere Sovrano E La Nuda Vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005).
[20] Primo Levi, *Se Questo È Un Uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1958).
[21] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 459.
[22] Johannes Lang, "Explaining Genocide: Hannah Arendt and the Social-Scientific Concept of Dehumanization," in *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh (London: Anthem Press, 2017), 175–96.
[23] Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 424.
[24] Rowan Savage, "Modern Genocidal Dehumanization: A New Model," *Patterns of Prejudice* 47, no. 2 (2013): 131–61, 147.
[25] Savage, "Modern Genocidal Dehumanization," 155.

The universality and necessity of dehumanization has been questioned, however. In many cases, a weaker sense of depoliticization sufficed. Christopher Browning's seminal examination of "ordinary" Nazi perpetrators noted that many among them were profoundly aware of, and indeed frequently struggled with, the fellow humanity of their victims.[27] Studies have shown that aversion to killing fellow human beings at scale does not always require their prior dehumanization, particularly when the practice has become normalized.[28] Here, Arendt's assumptions have been widely overhauled, and may themselves be viewed as preventing analytical empathy with perpetrators. Johannes Lang has compellingly argued that much genocidal violence is in fact aimed precisely at extending "the perpetrator's sense of power over another human being."[29]

In revolutionary Ethiopia, violence was predicated on the repudiation of victims' social lives and personhood. Biological characterizations and overt dehumanization were rare, while depersonalization was ubiquitous. Kissi has noted that categories of citizenship were notably narrowed in the Derg's 1974 penal code, which defined a "revolutionary Ethiopian" in terms of loyalty to the regime's political programme.[30] After assuming complete control of the Derg in February 1977, Mengistu reiterated this narrow conception of citizenship, declaring at a large rally in Addis Ababa that "only those who are opposed to imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and who are genuine revolutionaries and patriots, will have a place in socialist Ethiopia."[31] It was widely understood, and soon amply demonstrated in practice, that these categories were to be interpreted in terms of unquestioned loyalty to the Derg. Over the following months, dissidents real and imagined were labelled in government media and statements inter alia as "anarchists," "counter-revolutionaries," and "anti-people elements," terms in a new lexicon of revolutionary Amharic designed to mark them out as politically, and hence socially, deviant.[32] The step from the denial of citizenship status to violence-legitimating othering was a short one.

It was, above all, in particular acts of violence that such depersonalization was most apparent. Murdered bodies of victims, often disfigured by sustained torture, were dumped on streets and in public places. The location of such displays was chosen strategically to amplify the Terror. Many were left in places at which the victim was well known: in front of the family residence, at their workplace, or at bars that they used to frequent.[33] Others were unloaded at public sites including markets, bus stations and busy streets, forcing traffic to weave around them.[34] Corpse-watchers were stationed, at times for

[26] Gregory H Stanton, "Ten Stages of Genocide" Genocide Watch (1996) https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages (accessed 19 September 2021).
[27] Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).
[28] Compare Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Basic Books, 2000); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).
[29] Johannes Lang, "Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 2 (2010): 225–46, 225.
[30] Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide in Ethiopia and Cambodia,* 80.
[31] "Chairman Addresses Graduates of 30th Batch of Guennet Military School," *Ethiopian Herald*, 13 February 1977.
[32] Semeneh Ayalew and Binyam Sisay Mendisu, "What Is in a Term? A Historical and Linguistic Examination of the Revolutionary Terminology: Ywdäm, 'Let It Be Demolished, Down with,' 1974–1977," *Northeast African Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 53–70.
[33] Metekia, "Violence against and Using the Dead," 81.
[34] See e.g. John Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror: Missionary Experiences in Communist Ethiopia* (Charlotte, NC: Morris Publishers, 1996), 159.

days, to prevent bodies from being collected and buried and to report on local responses. The public mourning of those killed in the Red Terror was prohibited. In a number of instances, bereaved families were forced to sing songs extolling revolutionary violence in public. Some families were charged for the bullets that had slain their loved ones in order to have their corpse released.[35] Many more never learned of the fate of relatives who had disappeared upon their arrest or were said to have been moved from their site of detention. Especially during the closing stages of the Red Terror, and throughout the 1980s in areas of conflict, disappearances and internment in unmarked mass graves became commonplace.

The theatrical aspect of much of this violence was intended to strike terror into society, to weaken the active opposition to the Derg, and thereby to secure the regime's power. In a striking illustration of what Achille Mbembe has termed "necropolitics,"[36] the Derg relied on lethal violence to inscribe its claim to sovereignty on the ground and to bring an end to the contestation of Ethiopia's revolutionary situation. The regime's means to this end were the bodies of its murdered victims. Significantly, these victims had not been "dehumanized" – the effectiveness of the Terror relied precisely on their very human exemplification of the cost of non-compliance. Yet they had been systematically depersonalized, having been denied the relations, rituals and status in society that had constituted their social personhood. Instead, they had been reduced to political instruments of Derg power. Whether or not such depersonalization was necessary to motivate or legitimate perpetrators' violence, it lay at the heart of the Terror's political message. Any challenge to the Derg's sovereignty or claim to lead the revolution would place dissidents outside the social and legitimate political realm and mark them out as "reactionary" targets for revolutionary – and hence "red" – Terror.

Layers of Fear and Agency

The depersonalization of victims in the official rhetoric of the Red Terror relied on their characterization as a threat to society, to the revolution and to order and progress. Their elimination was cast as necessary, virtuous even, a matter of revolutionary and nationalist duty. The power of such rhetoric derived from the pervasive climate of fear that defined and overshadowed social ties and political processes in the years after the revolution.[37]

Several studies have highlighted how fear can act as a powerful driver of aggression and of genocidal violence.[38] Typically, such fear has a dual orientation. On the one hand, there is fear of the target group and of the threat it is alleged to pose, extensively emphasized in official propaganda. On the other hand, perpetrators in diverse contexts have been shown to act out of a fear of their own peers and of the consequences of non-participation. In his interviews with Rwandan perpetrators, for instance, Scott Straus found that the spectre of an RPF victory and the fear of reprisals for refusing to join genocidal militias were among the most common stated motivations for participation in atrocities.[39]

[35] Wiebel, "Let the Red Terror Intensify," 23.
[36] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
[37] Compare Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo, *Violence Workers,* 255.
[38] See for example Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).
[39] Straus, *The Order of Genocide.*

Derg members and their allies certainly had reason to fear for their power and safety on the eve of the Red Terror. The regime found itself increasingly on the back foot against a formidable guerrilla operation in Eritrea. In the Ogaden, it was confronted with the prospect of a large-scale Somali invasion, realized by July 1977. The primarily urban opposition around the popular EPRP had adopted an urban guerrilla strategy, labelled the "white terror" by the Derg, that centred on the targeted assassination of regime figures and collaborators. By the time Mengistu took control in February 1977, he had survived multiple attempts on his life. Several prominent government figures had fallen to EPRP bullets. In the provinces of Tigray, Gondar, Gojjam and Bale, meanwhile, the Derg faced escalating insurgencies. In René Lefort's words, "from every direction except Kenya, Addis Ababa heard the sound of marching soldiers."[40]

Surrounded by threats to its control of the state, the Derg also struggled for popular legitimacy and lacked the organizational capabilities or local intelligence to effectively dismantle insurgent opposition networks. It was for this reason that the government relied extensively on the mobilization of local informers and collaborators. It was through the comprehensive devolution of the state's means and narratives of violence that the Red Terror became a bottom-up as much as a top-down phenomenon, community violence as well as state violence. Derg supporters within newly formed "urban dweller associations" (*Kebele*) were armed and encouraged, not least through compulsory denunciation and confession meetings, to inform on and eradicate subversive actors within their neighbourhoods. "Revolution Defence" squads were organized and given license to carry out violence with impunity and minimal supervision. For a period it was, as Bahru Zewde memorably remarked, as if the "terror had become democratized."[41] This strategy of devolution to local actors' accounts for the evolving nature of atrocities in the Red Terror. During its early stages, violence tended to be either indiscriminate, targeting suspects on the basis of rudimentary profiling, or driven by local interests and animosities that often could not be equated with official rationales. It was only during the latter stages of the Terror, when the opposition ceased to pose a credible threat while fear of repression encouraged widespread denunciations and defections, that state violence became more centralized, selective, and effective.[42]

Fear and mistrust, then, operated within different strata of society to motivate and legitimate violence. The revolutionary situation had upended old hierarchies and notions of legitimacy. This allowed for unprecedented political possibilities to be envisioned, but it also encouraged multiple groups to pursue such visions violently. The result was the emergence of what Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros and Zimbardo, in their study of Brazilian police violence, have called an "atrocity environment": a sociopolitical climate of profound fear and insecurity among the public and security operatives, "tied to an assumption that [the latter] are "at war" against some segment of the population."[43]

In such a climate, Derg officials sought to leverage systematic violence and serial atrocities to secure their power and safety. Local actors who perpetrated much of the Terror's violence in urban neighbourhoods equally tended to do so out of fear: fear of the EPRP's

[40] René Lefort, *Ethiopia, an Heretical Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 192.
[41] Zewde, "The History of the Red Terror," 28.
[42] Wiebel, "Let the Red Terror Intensify"; in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War,* compare Stathis N. Kalyvas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ch. 7.
[43] Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo, *Violence Workers,* xx.

assassination campaign on the one hand, which tended to be most effective against low-level government collaborators. But fear also, especially as the Derg tightened its grip on society, of themselves being suspected of subversion and being targeted. As in numerous other cases of mass violence, participation in the Red Terror was therefore conditioned by an economy of fear, which was deeply responsive to the shifting supply of credible threats or promised protection and to demands for safety and for reliable local information.

New Structures of Violence and the Making of Perpetrators

Many studies have focused on the backgrounds and formation of perpetrators. In seminal works from Browning's *Ordinary Men* to Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*, historians and social psychologists have emphasized that perpetrators of mass violence tend to be the products of situational social environments, not simply "bad apples" found and used by brutal regimes.[44] Their formation commonly occurs within the context of newly established organizational structures, designed to carry out swift and extensive violence against a target group that is perceived as the cause of a grave threat. They therefore tend to operate within a climate in which their actions are sanctioned by the state, legitimated a priori, and subject to only minimal supervision or accountability.

Violence, within such organizational contexts, is less a product of individual disposition than of evolving structures, whether militias, police units or counter-insurgency squads, and of the operational cultures that spring from them.[45] The justification for violence within these structures widely relies on the interweaving of a national security discourse with the previously discussed dynamics of a perceived "atrocity environment" and of a depersonalizing of victims. Perpetrators conditioned within such groups are commonly trained to view the violence associated with their work as inevitable, even as socially beneficial. They are taught to regard empathy as weakness. And they are induced to associate brutality with commitment and with group masculinity.[46]

In the scholarship on revolutionary Ethiopia, such comparative insights are yet to be fully absorbed. Here, too, perpetrators were formed within the organization structures that employed them, units that often became the locus of convergence between local agency and state-mandated policies of violence. Yet the analytical gaze remains directed elsewhere: either "below," on the putative social origins of local perpetrators, or "above," on the orders and decisions of the upper echelons of the Derg.[47] It is often noted, for instance, that many perpetrators were drawn from "the lower strata of society," as Abbink has written in one of the most noteworthy studies of the Red Terror; [48] "la canaille des bidonvilles," in Lefort's more colourful description.[49] When a popular memoir spoke of perpetrators in the Red Terror as "misfits, crazy and mad people" who are present in any

[44] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (London: Tavistock, 1974); Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Philip G. Zimbardo, "A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People Are Transformed into Perpetrators" in *Crimes of War: Iraq*, ed. Richard Falk, Irene Gendzier, and Robert Jay Lifton (New York: Nation Books, 2006).
[45] David M Anderson, "British Abuse and Torture in Kenya's Counter-Insurgency, 1952–1960," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, no. 4–5 (2012).
[46] Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and Zimbardo, *Violence Workers,* 249.
[47] E.g. Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987*.
[48] Jon Abbink, "The Impact of Violence: The Ethiopian 'Red Terror' as a Social Phenomenon" in *Krieg Und Frieden: Ethnologische Perspektiven*, ed. Jon Abbink, Peter Bräunlein, and Lauser Andrea (Bremen: Kea Edition, 1995), 136.
[49] René Lefort, *Ethiopie: La Révolution Herétique* (Paris: F. Maspéro, 1981) 279.

society but whom the revolution had empowered, it is the bluntness rather than the thrust of the analysis that is exceptional.[50] Perpetrators are assumed to be predisposed to brutality, rather than products of periods and structures of heightened violence. Here, it is as if Arendt had never written about the "banality of evil," as if Milgram had never carried out his experiments, as if Browning's "ordinary men" had no comparative lessons of value to teach.

How a broad range of actors *became* perpetrators in the Red Terror, what organizational structures and operational cultures conditioned their actions, is yet to be adequately researched. Official records, published memoirs and oral interviews with survivors all highlight revealing patterns of violence at particular detention sites and among groups of perpetrators.[51] Important aspects of operational cultures within such groups are evident within all such materials: preferred methods of violence, shared among and sometimes between units; common strategies for depersonalizing or terrorizing victims; mechanisms for enforcing or complying with peer pressure; and ways of performing a violent masculinity.

Remarkably, many organizational structures through which the Ethiopian Terror was implemented were recent creations. These included "Revolution Defence" squads and "Red Terror committees" in neighbourhoods, at workplaces and in trade unions, as well as teams of interrogators operating within detention sites that were mushrooming across urban Ethiopia in this period.[52] The established police and security forces also played a significant role in Ethiopia's revolutionary violence: soldiers in the regular Armed Forces led the counter-insurgency efforts in Eritrea and Tigray, supported by vast conscript peasant militias. They also participated in some atrocities of the Red Terror, such as the May Day massacres of 1977. Similarly, intelligence officials belonging to organizations such as the Central Investigation Department led violent interrogations at major detention sites to which notable suspects were funnelled. Most agents of the Red Terror, however, operated within new structures that had been established in the years after the revolution to eradicate anti-Derg activities.

The hub of violence work in this period was the expanding web of improvised detention and interrogation sites located in residential properties that the government had recently nationalized.[53] These were often staffed by employees of each neighbourhood's *Kebele* association. The *Kebele* became the most local arms of the Ethiopian state. They had been founded in 1975 for administrative and mobilization purposes, but rapidly became enmeshed in security operations. Recruited in the first instance from among young cadres already employed for administrative duties, members of these new *Kebele* interrogation teams and other "revolutionary" units operated outside of the established police and security forces, and largely independently from them. It was in these groups that local administrators and citizens were trained to become violence workers.[54]

[50] Felekech Metaferia Woldehana, *Sparkle: The Protegée of Emperor Haile Selassie - My Memories of Ethiopian Girlhood* (Oxford: Trafford Publishing, 2002).
[51] See e.g. Special Prosecutor's Office, ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ [*A Dossier Carrying Blood*] (Addis Ababa, 2010); Hiwot Teffera, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2012).
[52] "Newsletter from Ethiopia," Amnesty International, 10 April 1978.
[53] Abera Yemane Ab, "The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution and the role of the Soviet Union" in Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa: New York, 1988), 92.
[54] Wiebel and Admasie, "Rethinking the Ethiopian Red Terror."

Those employed within such structures came under significant pressure from three directions: firstly, they often found themselves on the front lines of the struggle against opponents of the Derg, not only as perpetrators of state-sanctioned violence but also as prime targets of retaliation by EPRP hit squads at the local level. The threat that they had been hired and trained to eradicate was as much an experiential as an ideological one to them. Secondly, violence workers were under clear instructions and constant pressure from Derg officials to upend opposition activities within their localities and to produce local intelligence. The similarity in torture methods used across different units and administrations indicates the centralized training they received, as well as a degree of regular exchange between them. However, violence workers were also afforded considerable freedom in deciding how to fulfil their mandate, particularly during the early stages of the Red Terror. Such autonomy generated the third type of pressure, often the most immediate: the pressure arising from developing operational norms and social relations *within* their units. Here, brutality towards victims widely became the currency for demonstrating loyalty, for displaying revolutionary zeal, and for proving commitment to the group and its cause. As a result, mercilessness was widely rewarded with in-group trust and even with leadership positions, whereas restraint and expressions of empathy risked inviting suspicion or even purges. The fact that most of these organizational structures were new and established specifically to carry out "revolutionary measures" meant that their practices were less circumscribed by the pre-existing behavioural norms and accountability structures of the regular security services.

Much of the local diversity in the forms and scale of violence – some neighbourhoods saw intense local reigns of terror while others were largely spared – can be explained by the varying intensity of such pressures. In localities with a strong opposition presence, the pressures from "without" and from "above" were most intense, generating a more pronounced institutionalization of violent practices within units. The dual origin of external pressure also indicates the extent to which such groups operated at the intersection between the state and society. Embedded in the local communities within which they worked, it was not uncommon for perpetrators to be familiar with victims' backgrounds, networks, and activities. This resulted in local and personal conflicts being widely absorbed into the dynamics of the Terror.[55] It also meant that violence workers, some of whom had been recruited after themselves being "broken" under torture, were in a unique position to gather, extract, or act on local intelligence.

In the course of the Terror, the activities of local groups were increasingly centralized, and their autonomy was gradually restricted.[56] Reforms to the Derg's intelligence apparatus allowed intelligence gathered by local units to be centrally processed, combining with improved surveillance capacities to effectively dismantle the EPRP and other oppositional organizations. Many of these reforms were achieved in close collaboration between the Derg government and its socialist bloc allies.[57] Such alliances alert us to the importance of understanding violence in revolutionary Ethiopia not only in relation to the country's internal political history, but also against the background of an influential global history.

[55] Wiebel, "Let the Red Terror Intensify."
[56] Radoslav A Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa During the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism* (Lexington Books, 2016); Wiebel and Admasie, "Rethinking the Ethiopian Red Terror."
[57] Wiebel and Admasie, "Rethinking the Ethiopian Red Terror," 473.

Revolutionary Violence and Global History

If our discussion thus far has suggested a need to "zoom in" in order to understand the causes and mechanisms of mass violence in revolutionary Ethiopia, then we must equally insist on a parallel "zooming out." That is, we must adopt an analytical scale that transcends national frames. There is no doubt that systematic atrocities under the Derg grew out of the country's long history of violence, imperial or otherwise, outlined in the other contributions to this collection. These atrocities, however, cannot be adequately understood in purely endogenous terms. They were underpinned and facilitated by the participation of Ethiopians, especially state actors, in global systems of power and of exchange. These included, but were not restricted to, the Derg's alliance with socialist bloc governments. That comparisons between the Ethiopian Terror and numerous other cases of sociopolitical upheaval and state-sponsored atrocity in the twentieth century resonate so strongly does not indicate parallel developments or universal processes of social change and state-building. Rather, it reflects a common entanglement in shared global histories.[58]

The language of "Red Terror" itself drew on a pedigree that included, beyond its eighteenth-century French precedent, other twentieth century socialist revolutions, most notably that of Russia in 1917. In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, this language was leveraged to legitimate and glorify extrajudicial violence, depicted as a revolutionary necessity. As a spokesman of the Derg commented bluntly in response to criticism of the regime's human rights violations: "if they say we do not have to kill people, are they not saying we have to quit the revolution? The cry to stop the killing is a bourgeois cry."[59] The reach of this shared transnational register is reflected in the reaction of Soviet professors at Addis Ababa University, who were delighted to witness in Ethiopia the revolution they had been too young to experience in Russia. They saw in the Red Terror not only a clear parallel to its Russian precedent but also the hallmark of a true revolution.[60] Their assessment of Ethiopia's violence was shaped by the circulation of the same ideas, texts and narratives that had led Ethiopian intellectuals to enthusiastically advocate for armed struggle.

Engagement with ideological registers shared across diverse societies went hand in hand with participation in global flows of expertise, hardware, and finance. Here, it was not only the system of global socialist networks that shaped Ethiopia's internal violence under the Derg: over the preceding decades, the country had increasingly opened up to capitalist investment, and, at the level of the state, developed corresponding alliances that withered only very gradually after the revolution of 1974. The US did not end its military support for Ethiopia until early 1977, when the military station it had maintained at Kagnew in Eritrea lost its strategic significance. Citing the country's atrocious human rights record offered a "convenient and low-cost" exit strategy.[61] Several counter-insurgency and interrogation practices employed under the Derg may be traced back to training provided by western allies in the late imperial era.[62]

[58] Conrad, *What Is Global History?*
[59] Dadimos Haile, *Accountability for Crimes of the Past and the Challenges of Criminal Procecutions: The Case of Ethiopia* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 13.
[60] Katz, "Children's Revolution: A Bloodbath in Ethiopia," 8–9.
[61] Embassy Report from Washington, D.C., TNA FCO 31/2080-72, 23 March 1977.
[62] Thomas P Ofcansky and LaVerle Bennette Berry, "Ethiopia: A Country Study" (1993), 301; Norman J Singer, "Ethiopia: Human Rights, 1948-1978," (paper presented at the proceeding of the first international conference on ethiopian studies, 1978), 670.

The Derg's pivot to the East built on and expanded such partnerships: Soviet and Cuban support handed Ethiopia a decisive victory over Somalia in the Ogaden. Soviet military and economic aid underpinned the Derg's military power and counter-insurgency measures. And Ethiopian intelligence services built close alliances with several socialist bloc counterparts, including the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.[63] If these allies were often not sanguine about the international visibility of the Derg's domestic repression, they nonetheless tolerated it and made it possible, both materially and by shielding the Ethiopian regime geopolitically. The form, the rhetoric, the scale, and the persistence of state-sanctioned violence under the Derg would be incomprehensible apart from these global entanglements. Ethiopia's participation in international and transnational networks of ideological and material ambition and exchange underlines the importance of drawing the country's historiography deeper into comparative and global discussions, not least about causes and dynamics of state violence.

Conclusions: Emerging Research Agendas and the Content of Memorialisation

This essay has argued that there is much to be gained by bringing the historiography of revolutionary Ethiopia into closer conversation with the field of genocide studies. Such an integration holds much promise for cross-fertilization, as the preceding sections have sought to illustrate. For Ethiopian historiography, closer participation in comparative discussions about mass violence also raises fresh questions and perspectives, and thereby generates new research agendas. Beyond the aforementioned need to develop a more global vantage point, two such inquiries appear particularly urgent.

The first concerns the role of rape and sexual violence as acts of genocide and as a military strategy in conflicts. Much light has been shed on this subject by studies focused on other atrocities, notably in Rwanda.[64] Documented mass rapes during the recent war in Tigray have brought the issue of systematic sexual violence in Ethiopian conflicts to global attention. Yet there is nothing new about such violence. While its occurrence in a wide range of atrocities, including the Red Terror, is widely noted by witnesses, the subject remains poorly documented and insufficiently understood.[65]

A second discussion among genocide scholars that carries obvious significance for Ethiopian Studies, and to which Ethiopian historiography might have much to contribute, concerns the question of continuities between imperial violence and later atrocities in the metropole. The extent to which the Nazi Holocaust drew on colonial-era violence remains subject to heated debate.[66] Yet there is no doubt that the question is an important one for

[63] Yordanov, *The Soviet Union and the Horn of Africa During the Cold War: Between Ideology and Pragmatism*; Wiebel and Admasie, "Rethinking the Ethiopian Red Terror," 473.

[64] Binaifer Nowrojee, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence During the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath* (Human Rights Watch, 1996); Lisa Sharlach, "Gender and Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Agents and Objects of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no. 3 (1999): 387–99; Adam Jones, "Gender and Genocide in Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research* 4, no. 1 (2002): 65-94; Sherrie L Russell-Brown, "Rape as an Act of Genocide," *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21 (2003): 350–74; Christopher W Mullins, "'He Would Kill Me with His Penis' Genocidal Rape in Rwanda as a State Crime," *Critical Criminology* 17, no. 1 (2009): 15–33.

[65] Most of my informants in oral interviews noted that sexual violence was a regular occurrence at their detention sites during the Red Terror. See also Teffera, *Tower in the Sky*; Abbink, "The Impact of Violence."

[66] See e.g. Jürgen Zimmerer, "Colonialism and the Holocaust–Towards an Archeology of Genocide," *Development Dialogue* 50 (2007): 95–123.

Ethiopian historiography: to what extent were atrocities against citizens at Ethiopia's political "core" founded on earlier imperial violence against new subjects in the Empire's "periphery"? Apparent continuities in the forms of violence employed – including the public display of bodies that became infamous in the Red Terror – and in the rhetoric of political exclusion suggest an important line of inquiry.

If there is much potential for the integration of Ethiopian historiography and genocide studies to yield cross-fertilizing insights, the resultant work might also benefit memorialization efforts in the country. Monuments that preserve the memory of revolutionary Ethiopia's atrocities and victims have drawn heavily on the language, material culture and symbolism of genocide memorialization elsewhere.[67] Among such appropriations is the common slogan of "never again" (*mechem endaydegm*), intended to distil the moral lessons of genocide studies into two words pregnant with meaning. Yet persistent state violence and recent conflicts have emphasized the need to explicate this meaning, and particularly to refocus attention on the conditions as well as the outcomes of past atrocities. The conditions for the Red Terror outlined in this essay – the depersonalization of political opponents, the instrumentalization of an "atrocity environment," and the creation of minimally accountable violence-facilitating organizational structures – are all unspoken at public memorial sites and remain operative in national and global politics. There is much to be gained by developing and leveraging comparative approaches to atrocities in the Ethiopian past.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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[67] Echoes of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and of the Kigali Genocide Memorial are particularly striking. See Conley, *Memory from the Margins*.