

The Ethiopian Red Terror

Dr Jacob Wiebel, University of Durham

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Summary

The Red Terror was a period of intense political and inter-communal violence in revolutionary Ethiopia during the late 1970s. This violence erupted two years after the revolution of 1974 and was concentrated in the cities and towns of Ethiopia, and particularly in Addis Ababa, Gondar, Mekele, Asmara, and Dessie. In the struggle over the direction and ownership of the revolution, opposition groups of the radical left violently opposed a military regime that itself came to embrace and promulgate Marxist-Leninist language and policies, and which heavily relied on the use of armed force to stifle dissent. While much of the violence was carried out by security personnel, the delegation of the state's means and instruments of violence to newly formed militias and to armed citizens was a defining feature of the Red Terror. The number of casualties and victims of the Red Terror remains heavily contested and is subject to divergent counting criteria and to definitions of the Terror's scope in relation to other concurrent conflicts in the region, such as the Eritrean and Tigrayan civil wars; plausible figures are as high as 150.000, in addition to the many more who were subjected to torture, exile, personal losses and other forms of violence. To this day, the Red Terror constitutes a period that is remembered in Ethiopia as much for the forms of its violence as for its extent. Its ramifications, from the support it triggered for the ethno-nationalist insurgencies that overthrew the military regime in 1991 to its role in the emergence of a sizeable Ethiopian diaspora, make the Red Terror an episode of defining and lasting significance in the modern history of Ethiopia.

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Defining the Red Terror

In the aftermath of the Ethiopian revolution of 1974, the country's cities experienced two years of state violence unprecedented in either scale or intensity. Several tens of thousands of Ethiopian citizens were murdered, many more tortured, abducted or detained without trial. Most of the victims were young; many were educated. Dead bodies were left on public display, denied customary burials. These performances and experiences of collective violence are widely remembered as the Ethiopian Red Terror. The violence relied on the formation of new state structures at the local level. It also depended on close collaboration between the military regime and civilian groups, and hence on the mobilisation and participation of thousands of 'ordinary citizens'. The killings were facilitated by new alliances with socialist bloc allies. The Red Terror is widely regarded as a decisive juncture in Ethiopia's modern history: bringing an end to pan-Ethiopian opposition to Mengistu Haile Mariam's military regime; generating Ethiopia's permanent diaspora; fuelling ethno-nationalist insurgencies in the rural areas; and casting shadows on state-society relations that reverberate to the present.

None of these developments was anticipated when the Ethiopian revolution broke out. Sometimes described as 'the silent revolution' or 'the creeping coup', the process that brought an end to Ethiopia's imperial era was completed on 12 September 1974, Ethiopian New Year's day. In a performance rich in symbolism, members of the Armed Forces escorted the ageing Emperor, Haile Selassie I, from his palace in a simple Volkswagen Beetle, placing him under house arrest. There the long-serving monarch, who had first come to power in 1916, would die within a year under suspicious circumstances. His deposition marked the culmination of a

process which had witnessed protests from diverse sections of society, from soldiers to students to taxi drivers to Ethiopia's large Muslim minority. Celebrating the unprecedented political change, which coincided with the end of the rainy season in the Ethiopian highlands, thousands of citizens took to the streets in a show of support and anticipation for a better future. Domestic and international commentators as well as activists spoke with confidence and a sense of achievement of the historical anomaly of a 'revolution without blood'. The ancien régime had fallen with scarcely any resistance and without recourse to significant violence.

Such optimism was short-lived, however. The rhetoric of a bloodless revolution was soon to appear as a distant and uncertain memory. Within weeks, the shedding of blood became an integral aspect of the Ethiopian revolution. Soon, it began to be justified as essential for the safeguarding of its achievements and prospects. In November 1974, revolutionary violence first made the headlines: 59 leading members of the ancien régime were executed on orders of the radical wing within the Provisional Military Administrative Council, the junta of low-ranking officers widely known as the 'Derg'. Rural insurgencies and local opposition sprang up across the country, fueling a new revolutionary order which was, if anything, more violent than its imperial predecessor. These rural insurgencies, spearheaded particularly by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), were to grow throughout the 1970s and '80s; in 1991, they culminated in the overthrow of the military regime. Yet the violence of revolutionary Ethiopia was not restricted to these primarily rural insurgencies. By September 1976, revolutionary violence also became a defining feature of everyday life in Ethiopia's major cities, issuing in a period of public killings and widespread disappearances and torture widely remembered as the Ethiopian Red Terror.

The violence of the Red Terror was largely an urban phenomenon, although its dynamics were closely tied to the development of the rural insurgencies in the north of the country, and

its repercussions certainly extended to the countryside. It occurred as members of a Marxist opposition group, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), launched a campaign of targeted assassinations against the Derg and its civilian collaborators, which included a rival Marxist organisation with similar aspirations: the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Meison). The regime responded to the EPRP's challenge by declaring a 'Red Terror' of extrajudicial revolutionary violence as official state policy. The climax of the Terror occurred between 1976 and 1978, two years during which public killings became a normalised aspect of Ethiopia's revolutionary situation.

While the Ethiopian Red Terror is usually closely identified with state violence, it is important to remember that the label of "Red Terror" was a contested one at the time. Since the EPRP as well as the military regime and its allies self-identified as Marxists, both camps portrayed their campaigns of revolutionary violence as being 'red', that is, revolutionary. Red Terror was understood to mean revolutionary violence, carried out by the proletariat or its representatives and justified by the exigencies of a revolutionary situation. By the same logic, the military regime and its allies as well as the EPRP at the time characterised the violence carried out against their own organisations as 'White Terror', allegedly counter-revolutionary and reactionary. This contested meaning of the term "Red Terror" has now largely been forgotten; most scholars who write about the Red Terror understand the term to refer to the state violence carried out by the Derg.

Which acts of violence are understood to have been part of the Ethiopian Red Terror is important because varying definitions have had a direct bearing on divergent narratives concerning its scope. When the successor regime to the Derg, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) instituted a Special Prosecutor's Office to prosecute human rights abuses during the Red Terror, its definition of the Terror was so comprehensive as to include any form of state violence carried out by the Derg against civilians between 1974

and 1991. Such a definition of the Ethiopian Red Terror may be argued to be at once excessively broad and problematically narrow: too broad in that it fails to distinguish the Red Terror from other contemporary conflicts in the region, such as the nationalist rebellions in Tigray and Eritrea; too narrow in that it excludes the violence not carried out by the military regime itself.

To avoid such ambiguities, it is preferable to understand the Ethiopian Red Terror as referring specifically to the urban campaigns of violence of the late 1970s, all of which aimed at eliminating rival claimants to leadership of the revolution and were justified with reference to revolutionary theory and history. Such an understanding facilitates the difficult task of estimating the approximate number of persons who were killed in the Red Terror's violence. Vastly differing estimates in the literature are the product of ambiguous definitions as well as of methodological challenges and, not infrequently, of analysts' partisan interests. Two opposite examples illustrate this tendency: on the one hand, in the memoirs of Derg Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had adopted and tirelessly defended the policy of extrajudicial revolutionary violence, the estimated victim count of the Red Terror is a mere 2000.¹ This figure is underpinned as much by an excessively narrow definition of Red Terror as it is by a desire to minimise his regime's responsibility. The figure is easily dismissed, as a greater number of casualties has been named and documented by the Special Prosecutor's Office. On the other hand, the "conservative" estimate of 150.000 offered in the first published history of the Red Terror by Babile Tola - the pseudonym of a leader of the Marxist opposition to the Derg - is left unsubstantiated and is certainly too high if by "Red Terror" we mean the rival campaigns of revolutionary violence of 1976-'78.²

The problem of establishing a reliable victim count is compounded by the decentralised nature of much of the Terror's violence and by the systematic exclusion of external and independent observers. Precise numbers are likely to remain elusive; it is difficult to avoid the

conclusion reached by a survey of the US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration, which argued that “it is impossible to calculate the exact number of those killed, imprisoned or forced to flee the country [in the Terror].”³ Early estimates suggest the killing of 30.000 to 50.000 Ethiopians in non-separatist violence in the major cities by 1977⁴, a number that may have risen significantly by late 1979.⁵ To such casualty figures one must add the tens of thousands who were subjected to torture and often lengthy extrajudicial detention, and the hundreds of thousand whose lives were profoundly affected by the mental health crisis, the loss of loved ones and their social and economic support, and the widespread exile that attended the Red Terror for so many.

Policies of state violence against non-compliant civilian populations are not without precedent in Ethiopia’s modern history. In the 19th century, the punitive campaigns of Tewodros II, the subjugation of Wollo by Emperor Yohannes IV and the violent southwards expansion of Empire by Menelik II are all well-documented.⁶ More recently, the imperial regime of Haile Selassie I had forcefully suppressed expressions of dissent in the rural areas of Wollo, Tigray, the Ogaden and Bale, whilst also taking a violently uncompromising stance towards demands for Eritrean autonomy. Neither was the Red Terror’s public display of executed bodies unheard of; most residents of revolutionary Addis Ababa would have remembered the hanging of Mengistu Neway following his failed coup in 1960, whose body was left in public view for days outside of St George’s Cathedral. However, neither the scale - at least in an urban setting - nor the public ubiquity, justification and indeed celebration of violence that attended the Red Terror were familiar phenomena in the history of Ethiopia: at the peak of the revolutionary Terror, the corpses of thousands of alleged ‘counter-revolutionaries’ were left lying on urban streets, often with placards hung around their necks declaring their “crimes against the revolution” or bearing pro-regime slogans. Relatives were forbidden to publicly mourn the deaths of those deemed counter-revolutionaries, and in several

recorded instances were either prevented from retrieving the bodies of their killed family members or required to pay a fee in order to do so.⁷ Improvised detention centres sprang up in most neighbourhoods and added to the range of sites at which torture was systematically practiced and sexual violence, particularly against female detainees, was routine. Local militias were formed, armed and charged to extend the reach of revolutionary violence to the household level. Search campaigns became a regular feature of the Red Terror, temporarily bringing urban areas to a standstill, extending 'revolutionary justice' into private homes and resulting not only in mass detentions but also in widespread improvised public executions. These open practices of collective violence and their attendant casualty count eclipsed even the infamous massacres carried out in Addis Ababa by the occupying fascist Italians following the failed assassination attempt against viceroy Rodolfo Graziani a generation earlier, in 1937. In the scale, form and setting of its violence against the civilian population, the Red Terror was unprecedented in the region's modern history.

From Revolution to Red Terror

The roots of the Red Terror in Ethiopia's early revolutionary situation are best approached from four distinct yet related vantage points. Firstly, the radicalisation and organisation of an urban political class, associated especially with the burgeoning Ethiopian student movements, need to be accounted for. This has become arguably *the* dominant concern in the historiography of the revolution over the past years.⁸ Secondly, the divergent political visions and internal power struggles that characterised the Derg regime until Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam's rise to autocratic power need to be accounted for. The reality of 'multiple sovereignty' within the Derg had a profound effect on the onset and early dynamics of the Red Terror.⁹ Thirdly, and less commonly noted, it is essential that the local relations and tensions that were absorbed into the official discourses and practices of Terror through mass mobilisation in the early years of

revolution be recognised. These help to account both for the phenomenon of mass participation in revolutionary violence and for the local and regional variations in the scale and forms of violence.¹⁰ Finally, the effects of the experiences and expectations that attended the early years of revolutionary transformation need to be taken into consideration. The opening of political space, the enthusiasm of revolutionary activism and the tension between idealised visions of violence and first brutal experiences of it all affected the emerging Ethiopian Red Terror. Each of these four vantage points warrants further comment.

The politicisation and radicalisation of urban society that was to fuel the Red Terror was inextricably tied to the formation of new social and political classes during the late imperial period. While Ethiopia's working class was significantly smaller than one might infer from the widespread imported rhetoric of 'the revolution of and for the proletariat', popular trade unions and workers' political organisations did emerge, flourishing in the brief opening of political space that occurred in 1975 and into 1976. Here as elsewhere, however, much of the ideological impetus and political direction stemmed from the younger generation of the middle classes that had formed in the cities, in large part by imperial design in order to staff the burgeoning bureaucracy of the Ethiopian state and to check the power of the traditional nobility.¹¹ These emerging middle classes were distinguished by lifestyle elements widely regarded as western, including a western education. Despite a relative diversity of backgrounds among activists, it was from these new urban middle classes that the radical student movements, which became a prime vehicle of dissent and of political activism in the final decade of imperial rule, drew their leadership. Through the trajectory of their political thought and the formation of new political organisations, these students came to exert a profound influence on all sectors of urban society in the years before and during the Red Terror; equally decisive was their influence in shaping the justifications and practices of its violence.

In recent years, the politics, divisions and influences of the student movements have emerged as a major focus of study and analysis. Some scholars discern in the development of the students' utopian visions and internal tensions a trajectory that not only fed into, but also to a significant extent explains the outbreak and dynamics of the Ethiopian Red Terror.¹² The concerns and contests of student politics were conveyed to wider audiences after the revolution through the spade of political organisations that grew out of the student movements. Beside the ethno-nationalist groups that instigated insurgencies in the countryside and a swathe of minor organisations with small memberships, these included two parties that came to dominate and define the political cleavages and tensions of urban Ethiopia during the Red Terror: the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Meison), founded in 1968, and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which had been founded as the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organisation in 1972.¹³ Neither party played a direct role in the events that brought down the imperial regime in 1974, a revolution that both had envisioned but neither was prepared for. Yet once they announced themselves to the Ethiopian public through their clandestine publications, the organisations were well positioned to take advantage of the popular political involvement and quest for leadership and direction that followed the overthrow of the Emperor. Both parties grew rapidly in membership and developed complex organisational structures, connecting grassroots politics to central committees and allowing for the expansion, mobilisation and education of their following. The lion share of new members joined the EPRP; Meison's following was more limited but grew particularly among urban intellectuals and Oromo youths, a fact that has led some analysts to posit an ethnic interpretation of the divisions between the parties.

Tensions between these parties deepened significantly in the early years following the overthrow of the ancien regime. Whereas both organisations had begun by opposing the notion of a revolutionary military regime and by calling for the formation of a 'provisional people's

government',¹⁴ Meison's leadership was eventually swayed by the Derg's radical initiatives - most notably the land reform and nationalisation campaigns of 1975 - to modify its stance: a marriage of convenience was entered, whereby the party offered the regime its "critical support" in exchange for positions of influence that allowed for the politicisation and mobilisation of Ethiopian society under Meison's auspices. The party's political influence was thus closely tied to the connections that its leadership developed with the radical wing of the Derg: by the end of 1975, Meison cadres occupied a number of ministerial posts, had a major hand in the development of radical social and economic policies, and were schooling Derg officials including Mengistu Haile Mariam in the principles and language of Marxism-Leninism.

The alliance between the Derg and Meison was to have a profound effect on the Ethiopian Red Terror: not only did it militarise the division between the major Marxist parties that had emerged from the student movements, it also equipped the regime's radical wing around Mengistu Haile Mariam with the conceptual and organisational tools as well as the vocabulary of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory. These political networks and legitimising narratives became foundational for the Derg's domestic and foreign policy as much as for its campaigns of organised violence against civilians.

This leads to our second vantage point onto the emergence of the Red Terror: the internal power struggles within the Derg from its inception in 1974 to the rise to autocratic power of Mengistu Haile Mariam in February 1977. When it announced itself to the Ethiopian public, the military junta consisted of young officers whose political visions were as diverse as they were ill-defined. Beyond a shared commitment to a vague sense of nationalism, conveyed by the early slogan of 'Ityopia Tikdem' ("Ethiopia First"), members disagreed radically on the pace and nature of constitutional reform, on solutions to the Eritrean question, on alignment in foreign policy and on the future of military rule. The Derg's first Chairman, Aman Andom -

unlike the bulk of the regime a recognised, popular and decorated General and war veteran - proposed non-military solutions to the Eritrean crisis, a non-aligned foreign policy and non-violent dealings with imperial officials. Such a conciliatory approach put him at odds with younger, more radical officers, ultimately resulting in his assassination.¹⁵ In the course of 1975, clear alliances crystallised within the regime: on the one hand a more moderate grouping, which included not only the new Chairman Tafari Bante but also prominent figures like Captain Moges Wolde Mikael, who sympathised with the EPRP and publicly made the case for conciliation and more inclusive government;¹⁶ on the other hand a more radical wing, early on identified with Mengistu Haile Mariam and calling for an alliance with the socialist bloc externally and a heavy-handed response to any dissenters internally. These internal tensions within the military regime had an important effect on the emergence of the Red Terror. They not only gave Derg policy an inconsistent and haphazard character that fuelled dissent and generated the image of a tottering regime that could be violently overthrown. They also paralysed the regime's response to the challenge of urban opposition. For instance, sporadic extrajudicial executions occurred at the orders of the radical wing throughout late 1976, even while moderates were publicly arguing for a united front of all revolutionaries. Neither side was able to define regime policy or to instrumentalise the state apparatus for its ends, encouraging violent opposition initiatives and preventing the adoption of a coherent counter-insurgency approach.

A third vantage point onto the roots of the Red Terror remains insufficiently recognised in the historiography: the local relations and tensions that were politicised in the early revolutionary period and absorbed into the rivalry between those who worked with the Derg and their opponents. Between 1974 and 1976 the EPRP developed a sophisticated, albeit ultimately too centralised structure of local cells. The government's Provisional Office of Mass Organisational Affairs (POMOA) meanwhile, led and largely staffed by Meison members, built

its mobilisation effort on the most consequential early institutions of the revolutionary period: the *Kebele* ['Urban Dweller' Associations'], local administrative structures that allowed the regime and its allies to 'see' and control the lives of citizens at neighbourhood level to an unprecedented degree. Founded in August of 1975 to administer nationalised housing, the function and remit of the *Kebele* rapidly expanded in the following years. Local households were numbered and closely surveyed, their members encouraged and often coerced to participate in political education classes. By December 1976 most *Kebeles* had their own militia and detention centre, three months later these most local of state structures were formally given authority to control all movement, to note any absences from official demonstrations and to detain citizens at will. Local residents staffed the new structures and carried out such activities with a high degree of independence and impunity. Through the *Kebele* and their clandestine counterparts, the local EPRP cells, organised violence devised at centralised leadership levels was enacted within local neighbourhoods. Conversely, local disputes and grievances were settled in the name and through the means of the regime's or the EPRP's revolutionary struggle.

Finally, the onset of the Red Terror needs to be understood in light of widespread experiences and expectations of the early revolutionary period. The implosion of the imperial regime had generated a remarkably open space for political discussion and for expressions of dissent, unusual among African military regimes and unprecedented in Ethiopia's modern history. This space for open political discussion was augmented further in the wake of the alliance between the Derg and Meison, which saw even the pages of the government daily *Addis Zemen* opened to opposition contributors and political debate via its specifically designed *Abyotawi Medrek* ['Revolutionary Forum'] section. These rare open political debates were no mere elite activity: in early 1976, government newspapers became the most coveted

publications in the capital, reportedly selling out within an hour and reselling second hand at five times the original price.¹⁷ This political opening extended beyond the realm of print media. Trade union membership, tolerated in minimal form under the late imperial regime, flourished into a fulcrum of civil society activism and posed a significant challenge to the power of the military regime. To a rapidly expanding generation of young activists, this opening indicated the beginning of much broader political transformations, of which they regarded themselves as the vanguard. Revolutionary violence, abstracted and idealised, was understood as a necessary and legitimate instrument for accomplishing such change by actors on all sides, while first experiences of violence were taken as signs of the need to defend with armed force whatever gains had already been achieved. It was in this context of idealised activism, of regime instability, of grassroots mobilisation and of political visions for violent social transformation that collective violence would escalate into the Red Terror.

The onset of Red Terror

There have long been heated debates about the question of who fired the first shot in the Ethiopian Red Terror, among participants initially but soon also in a historiography that remains defined by their contributions. On the one side of these debates are those scholars who interpret the Derg's Red Terror as a response to the urban guerrilla strategy adopted by the EPRP. Ambushes and targeted assassination attempts had first been launched by the EPRP's newly announced 'urban defence squads' in September 1976. Their primary target, Mengistu Haile Mariam himself, narrowly survived a first attack. But in the following weeks nine out of the original fifteen members of POMOA were murdered, a tally that rose swiftly to comprise at least fifty high-profile government supporters by March 1977. Already in late 1976 the EPRP's urban defence squads had been expanded to about 450 armed activists, organised into small militias active in urban neighbourhoods across Ethiopia and selecting increasingly local

regime collaborators as targets.¹⁸ To some interpreters, these violent strategies of the EPRP constitute the trigger for the Ethiopian Red Terror: state violence is thus portrayed as a “boomerang” coming full circle to hit the EPRP, or as a response to “the EPRP’s terrorist policies”.¹⁹

An alternative account is suggested by analysts who portray the EPRP’s recourse to urban guerrilla strategies as reactive and as constituting a necessary or at least legitimate response to preceding state repression. Here it is emphasised that the EPRP’s first prominent public attack did not occur until two weeks after the regime had launched a comprehensive propaganda effort against “the so-called EPRP and its reactionary allies” in the state media, demanding that regime opponents “be crushed by the broad masses”.²⁰ The following months witnessed sporadic executions of detainees, the first systematic neighbourhood search campaigns [*‘Asesa’*], and the formation of *Abyot Tebeka* [*‘Urban Defence’*] squads, local militias attached to each Kebele in order to “weed out counter-revolutionaries”. Emphasising these developments, some scholars see the escalation of revolutionary violence as rooted in the regime’s attempt to violently eliminate its urban opponents.²¹

Both sides thus point to initiatives of violence that triggered retaliation, and both discern September 1976 as the beginning of the urban violence that would culminate in the Red Terror. However, closer attention to the chronology of events requires both positions to be substantially revised. The decision by radicals within the Derg to pursue a violent repression of the EPRP was triggered by the party’s growing popularity and intrepidity, not by its assassination campaign. Likewise, it has since emerged that the EPRP had decided on its strategy of “offensive defence” already before the Derg’s repression was launched, and had likewise sanctioned assassinations against regime figures by August 1976.²² In light of this preceding bilateral build-up of armed force and tension, ascriptions of unilateral responsibility and causation carry limited explanatory force. Instead, as Bahru Zewde has argued, the onset of the

Red Terror is best understood as the culmination of hostilities that matured over the preceding months.²³ In particular, the path towards Red Terror was prepared by the decision of leading figures both within the Derg and within the EPRP to militarise confrontation, and especially by their shared strategy of delegating the execution of armed force to supporters at the local level.

The effect of these initiatives was twofold: on the one hand, they generated widespread perceptions of an atrocity environment that constitute the essential background against which the emergence of the fully fledged Red Terror needs to be understood. Regime members lived in constant fear of ambushes and came to regard violence against perceived EPRP members as vital to their personal safety as much as to the maintenance of their political power. *Kebele*-level actors, meanwhile, were confronted with powerful incentives and deterrents to collaboration via promises of protection or the threat of retaliation that militarised local tensions.

On the other hand, the adoption of strategies advocating for ‘revolutionary measures on the spot’ by the EPRP as well as by the Derg and its allies generated and exacerbated internal divisions within both camps. Within the EPRP, the decision to embrace an urban guerrilla strategy was opposed by founding members and formerly prominent student leaders Berhane Meskel Redda and Getatchew Maru. The party divided, eroding the internal cohesion and trust on which its early growth had been founded and expediting the leaking of essential information to the military regime through denunciations and defections. Within the Derg, meanwhile, calls for extrajudicial state violence by the radical faction around Mengistu Haile Mariam and his Meison advisors alarmed more moderate regime members who desired appeasement rather than escalation. At the latter’s initiative, the Derg was restructured in December 1976, investing further power in the position of Chairman held by the moderate General Tafari Bante in order to marginalise the then vice-Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam. Yet the strengthening of an

office only one position removed from Mengistu's own afforded him both the incentive and the requisite tools to expand his personal power. A violent purge of Mengistu's leading opponents on 3 February 1977 resolved the military regime's internal tensions. Mengistu became Chairman, introducing a spate of counter-insurgency initiatives that resulted in the adoption of Red Terror as declared state policy.

Red Terror as state policy

The execution of the most prominent moderate members of the Derg returned Ethiopian politics to a state of autocracy. State media, which mere days earlier had made the case for Chairman Tafari Bante's moderate policies and appeals for a 'common front' of all self-identified revolutionaries,²⁴ required two days to find a narrative that could explain the rapid turn of events. The story that was eventually reported suggested that the murdered moderates had planned an internal take-over of power, courageously exposed and foiled by the watchful revolutionaries of Mengistu's radical faction.²⁵ The killing of Derg moderates set the pattern for the regime's approach to any dissenters over subsequent months, removing all restraining influences against a systematic repression of the civilian opposition.

Within weeks of Mengistu's ascendancy to the position of Chairman, a range of new structures and practices of revolutionary violence were introduced or developed. The *Asesa* - search campaigns that systematically combed neighbourhoods for opposition activists in hiding, for weapons and for anti-Derg propaganda material - were now rolled out across urban Ethiopia. Searches in smaller provincial cities, invariably featuring impromptu executions, resulted in the dismantling of entire local EPRP structures.²⁶ A first major search in Addis Ababa in late March 1977 was marked by mass detentions and the killing of senior EPRP leaders. It also witnessed such indiscriminate violence and looting by local *Abyot Tebeka* squads that, following public complaints, subsequent searches were coordinated by the Army

itself rather than by local militias. Paralleling the *Asesa* were “mass-confession sessions”, mandatory gatherings often conducted at workplaces at which participants were encouraged to either confess their own counter-revolutionary activities or to denounce those of others present.

Meanwhile, the regime began to arm urban supporters through the *Kebele*, commanding them to “demolish forces opposed to the revolution” and to “meet with Red Terror [...] the White Terror of anarchists”.²⁷ The notion of a legitimate and requisite Red Terror, already widely circulating among members of both Meison and the EPRP, now began to enter into the public rhetoric and policy discourse of the Derg.

Armed by regime initiative, free to act with impunity and emboldened by the violence-legitimizing mandate of Red Terror, *Abyot Tebeka* squads in neighbourhoods across urban Ethiopia took revolutionary violence into their own hands. Throughout 1977, public displays of violence on an unprecedented scale occurred at *Kebele* level in towns and cities, often carried out by regime collaborators within local communities. Much of the Red Terror’s violence was therefore “intimate” in the dual sense highlighted in a different context by Joanna Bourke:²⁸ intimate in that victims and perpetrators often knew each other; intimate also in the sense that violence was usually conducted by hand at close range. Such violence took many forms.

Most visible were the public executions that became a common feature of everyday life during the Red Terror. All memoirs written about the period remark on the lines of corpses that were widely left on display, bearing placards denouncing counter-revolutionary activities. Equally known to local residents were the *Kebele* detention facilities that sprang up across urban neighbourhoods. Alongside the established prisons and the widely repurposed headquarters of Armed Forces these developed into prominent sites of violent interrogation. Torture was a ubiquitous feature of such examinations and features prominently in the recollections of surviving witnesses, as do the conditions of extreme suffering, privation and disease that defined all contemporary jails. Rarely discussed in memoirs and historiography

and yet widely experienced were episodes of sexual violence, suffered particularly though by no means exclusively by female detainees and widely threatened against relatives of those under interrogation who refused to collaborate. Many of those who survived the torture were left with physical and mental scars that would mark the rest of their lives. Nor ought the effects of the violence be reduced to those whose bodies were its primary targets: parents lost their sons and daughters, husbands and wives their spouses, children their parents. Many were left not merely grieving but deprived of breadwinners, social security and in many cases their own mental health.

Many victims of the Red Terror were youths who had dedicated their lives to the revolutionary struggle. Yet many others had taken no part in political activism; they found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, or fell victim to the personal revenge of rivals empowered by their positions within the *Kebele*. Localised reigns of terror overseen by actors emboldened by the Red Terror, such as Melaku Tefera of Gondar or Girma Kebede of Arat Kilo in Addis Ababa, gained national notoriety through their brutality.

A climax of the early Red Terror occurred on the eve of May Day 1977. In a last show of force, the EPRP's youth wing had organised demonstrations outside *Kebele* offices across Addis Ababa. Aware of these plans through information leaked in interrogations, the Derg's Security Office armed local militias with automatic firearms and put soldiers in armoured vehicles on stand-by. Once the demonstrations began thousands of youth activists were detained. Executions were carried out at local detention centres and in the forests around the capital throughout the night, leaving at least one thousand²⁹, and quite possibly twice that many,³⁰ youths dead. Infamously, relatives of killed victims were charged at mortuaries in subsequent days to have bodies released to them. The May Day massacres were swiftly followed by a declaration of *Netsa Ermeja* ['free measure'], a mandate for swift independent revolutionary action but widely interpreted as "an unrestricted license to kill".³¹ The period of

the *Netsa Ermeja* witnessed unprecedented levels of killings and arrests. A joint parade of regular Armed Forces and by *Abyot Tebeka* militia units on 24 June 1977 was hailed in government papers as the “red campaign against white terror”.³² It exemplified the Derg’s dual approach to the challenge of the radical urban opposition during the Red Terror, relying on arms of the state as well as on a delegation of state violence to local actors.

While celebrating the “elimination” of counter-revolutionaries, the Derg publicly disavowed violent excesses at the May Day massacres and during the *Netsa Ermeja*. These were blamed on its erstwhile and increasingly dispensable ally, Meison. By August, Meison’s leadership saw itself constrained to go underground and the party’s cadres were subjected to the same state terror as their rivals from the EPRP.

The height of the Ethiopian Red Terror occurred in the shadow of an interstate war that moved the Horn of Africa into the spotlight of the Cold War’s geopolitics. In July 1977, irredentist Somali forces trained and equipped by the Soviets invaded the Ethiopian Ogaden. Early Somali gains were followed first by a stalemate, then by a spectacular turnabout in Soviet foreign policy. Having established close ties with Mengistu’s regime and amid increasingly fraught relations with Siad Barre’s in Somalia, the Soviet Union and its socialist bloc allies switched patronage to the Ethiopian side and oversaw the defeat, in a matter of mere months, of an army they had constructed over the preceding decade. The largest airlift of military hardware to Africa in Cold War history and over 16,000 Cuban soldiers expedited an Ethiopian victory by February 1978.

The Ogaden war had two significant effects on the Ethiopian Red Terror. Firstly, it meant that the large-scale violence taking place within Ethiopia was largely ignored by international observers. Aside from sporadic reports by Amnesty International and by activist expatriate residents,³³ Ethiopia’s revolutionary violence made few headlines outside the country. Secondly, the Ogaden war provided the Derg with newfound domestic legitimacy as the

guardian of national identity and integrity, whilst also boosting the regime's new international relations to socialist bloc countries. In the second half of 1977, Ethiopia's security services thus developed close collaborations with their socialist bloc counterparts, particularly those from the German Democratic Republic. The Ethiopian Investigation Department and the Secret Services were trained, equipped and restructured with support from the East German Ministry for State and Public Security (the infamous 'Stasi'), allowing the Derg to conduct the Red Terror in a more centralised, systematic and planned manner. The effect of this collaboration on the Red Terror was dramatic. By late 1977 regime opponents found that their phones were tapped, their infiltrators in state institutions exposed and their cell structures eroded as comrades were arrested in large numbers.

Emboldened by its successes and determined to bring a rapid end to any urban opposition, the Derg declared that the revolution would henceforth follow "a path of Red Terror",³⁴ widespread practices of revolutionary violence were intensified and declared state policy. The following six months, from October 1977 to April 1978, marked the climax of the Terror in revolutionary Ethiopia. Streets were plastered with posters demanding that "the Red Terror be intensified"; images of the displayed corpses of 'counter-revolutionaries' were broadcast on national television; and detention facilities needed to be expanded to cope with new waves of arrests. In contrast to the earlier *Netsa Ermeja*, much of this officially proclaimed Red Terror was carried out by the Armed Forces' *Nebelbal* elite units.³⁵

With the militant urban opposition "eliminated as an effective anti-government force" by April 1978,³⁶ the Red Terror was gradually removed from public view. Nightly house searches, large-scale detention, interrogations using systematic torture and extrajudicial executions remained features of Derg rule until its overthrow in 1991; footage of Mengistu Haile Mariam announcing Red Terror by throwing bottles filled with red liquid at a mass demonstration was broadcast regularly on national television until the late 1980s. But by late 1978, the Ethiopian

Red Terror was largely over. The centres of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence moved to the countryside, and especially to the large-scale insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray.

Legacies of the Red Terror

What were the enduring consequences of the Red Terror for Ethiopian state and society? Some have been widely rehearsed and elaborated in the historiography. Beyond the death toll and the generation gap caused by the Red Terror, three legacies in particular are widely emphasised:³⁷ firstly, with any prospect of successful urban opposition to the Derg ended by the Red Terror, and at times motivated by experiences of its violence, many activists joined the rural insurgencies against the military regime. This was especially true in Eritrea, where thousands of rural youths fled the Red Terror in Asmara to join the EPLF.³⁸ Following the defeat of the EPRP's rural army by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1979,³⁹ armed opposition to the Derg overwhelmingly took the form of separatist or ethno-nationalist insurgency. Boosting recruits to the guerrilla movements, the Red Terror contributed to the ultimate demise of the Derg. Secondly, in the wake of the Red Terror a growing number of Ethiopians opted for exile. Combined with other push factors associated with the Derg regime, the Red Terror drove hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians to leave their country, generating the permanent and sizeable Ethiopian diasporas of North America and Europe.⁴⁰ Finally, the Red Terror had a notable effect on those who chose to stay in Ethiopia's cities, and hence on urban society and its relations to the state. In the wake of the Terror, both the political activism and the faith in progress that had marked the early revolutionary years evaporated. Many citizens, bereaved or scarred following the Red Terror, chose to retreat into private spheres and to eschew any civil society activism. The effect was not only a decade of dictatorial governance, but also a profound mistrust in state-society relations that outlasted the Derg regime.

Yet there are other legacies of the Red Terror that are yet to receive adequate attention. Scarce attention has been paid to the Terror's effect on mental health: most survivors can identify cases of mental health conditions among close family or friends that originated during or soon after the Red Terror, a crisis of particular gravity in light of the poor state of mental health provisions in Ethiopia. Similarly, the effects of the Terror on economic livelihoods has been insufficiently recognised, as many households lost not only loved ones but also the financial support on which they depended. Some scholars have also begun to trace connections between the end of the Red Terror and an upswing in religious life in the early 1980s, as a high percentage of formerly Marxist activists turned either to the Orthodox Church or to the Evangelical movement or the Mosques.⁴¹ Finally, the legacies of the Red Terror remain felt to this day through the very structures of local control and governance that it had relied on: integral to Ethiopia's revolutionary state violence was the development of the *Kebele* as an arm of the state that facilitated the control, policing and coercion of citizens at the household level. Whereas the *Kebele*'s militias were demobilised, the *Kebele* themselves survived as the defining local governance structure of the Ethiopian state, and remain critical to its high degree of control over civil society vis-a-vis other African states.

Discussion of the Literature

Despite the Ethiopian Red Terror's significance in modern African history, its historiography remains underdeveloped. Studies that have the Red Terror as their explicit focus are few: the first accounts of the Terror, in Amharic⁴² and in English,⁴³ were written by participants with strongly partisan viewpoints and little attention to historical method, characteristics that continue to affect much of the literature on Ethiopia's revolutionary violence. More scholarly is Gebru Tareke's comparison of the reign of Terror in Ethiopia with those that followed the 'classical' revolutions of France, Russia and China.⁴⁴ Building on this

foundation, Bahru Zewde has provided an introductory survey and a first periodisation of the Red Terror.⁴⁵ A tentative exploration of the Terror's social underpinnings, contextualising the dominant macro-political narrative, was published by Jan Abbink.⁴⁶ Following the same interest, an article by Jacob Wiebel examined the confluence of bottom-up and top-down initiatives in the execution and negotiation of Red Terror at the local level.⁴⁷

Beyond these brief studies, there is a developing historiography of the Ethiopian revolution within which the Red Terror often features prominently. Many of the early studies of the revolution were written by scholars whose primary interest lay in the theory and comparative study of revolution.⁴⁸ In some cases this resulted in attempts to conform Ethiopian realities to the mould of Marxist theory.⁴⁹ In others, for instance in a remarkable early polemic against the abuses of military rule,⁵⁰ it facilitated insightful analysis. The more descriptive accounts of the revolution have been those devoting closer attention to the Red Terror. Those seeking a narrative account of the events of the early revolutionary period will find the books by Andargachew Tiruneh and Dawit Shifaw especially useful.⁵¹ The 40th anniversary of the revolution and its violent aftermath has generated a number of conferences and publications devoted to its study; noteworthy in this regard is particularly the special edition on the revolution in *Northeast African Studies*.⁵²

A growing scholarship on the Ethiopian student movements has emerged as a distinct field of study, offering an important lens on preceding dynamics and continuities of violence that fed into the Red Terror. Balsvik's seminal study served as a foundation for subsequent works,⁵³ which sought a broader historical contextualisation or a more conceptual approach.⁵⁴ An oral history project led by Bahru Zewde⁵⁵ issued in a major study that has triggered lively debate.⁵⁶ Beyond the student movements, closer attention is finally being paid to the history of Ethiopian labour unions during the revolution, which developed into significant sites of

contestation and of Red Terror. Several publications on the subject by Samuel Andreas Admassie are forthcoming.

Less academic yet deeply significant for the study of the Red Terror are the chronicles of party histories published by leading figures within the EPRP and Meison. The most valuable contributions to this genre are Kiflu Tadesse's two-volume history of the EPRP⁵⁷ and Andargachew Assegid's Amharic account of Meison's founding and activities.⁵⁸ Unfortunately there is no English translation of Andargachew Assegid's book, while another exceptional history of Meison, written in English and presented as a seminar paper by Wudu Tafete, remains unpublished and difficult to access.⁵⁹

Complementing these party chronicles and portraying a richer experience of the lived experience of the Red Terror are a growing number of memoirs that have been published by a range of protagonists, participants and survivor. The growth of this genre, often published locally in Ethiopia, suggests that many participants have attained the critical distance to the Red Terror's traumatic events necessary to publicly recall their experiences. Some of these memoirs are written by leading figures of the era, most notable among which is Mengistu Haile Mariam himself.⁶⁰ Others stay close to the narratives developed by their former party leaders.⁶¹ Yet the value of memoirs to our understanding of the Red Terror lies in the alternative experiences, perspectives and life histories that they allow to be heard. Thus Konjit Teklu's *Surviving the Red Terror*, unfortunately out of print now, offers valuable insights into the everyday life of a young female activist;⁶² Makonen Getu's *The Undreamt* sheds light on the late repression of Meison and the angst that persecution generated at the experiential level;⁶³ and Hiwot Teffera's acclaimed memoir *Tower in the Sky* has brought the long-neglected history of the EPRP's internal divisions to public consciousness.⁶⁴

The literature that discusses and analyses the Ethiopian Red Terror remains limited and is often beset by weaknesses. Much of it consists of position papers, intent on condemning or

justifying a given position, action or group; the negotiation of memory has in places constituted a site for the continuation of conflict by other means. Most studies also remain focused at the leadership level and ignore agents and social dynamics that do not feature in the established narratives, marked by a focus on high politics. As first highlighted by Abbink, much work is yet to be done on the social and cultural history of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence. And it is regrettable that studies of the Red Terror remain - apart from the aforementioned comparisons with 'classical' revolutions and an interesting comparison with the Cambodian genocide⁶⁵ - largely isolated from conceptual and comparative discussions concerning the causes, meanings and effects of mass violence. Despite these limitations, however, there are encouraging signs: many participants are prepared to share their experiences with openness and critical candour; a new generation of scholars is examining the Red Terror with fresh questions and approaches; and the literature that sheds light on this consequential chapter of modern Ethiopian history is steadily growing both in depth and in breadth.

Primary Sources

Most studies of the Red Terror by necessity rely on the triangulation of different primary sources. Many have drawn on oral interviews with contemporary witnesses, or made use of the growing volume of memoirs published by them. Beyond these lies a range of archives that afford rich and diverse insights into the period.

In Ethiopia, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University holds a vast and significant collection: this includes contemporary government newspapers and gazettes, clandestine publications including the organs of the EPRP [*Democrasia*] and Meison [*YeSafiw Hizb Demz*] as well as a number of unpublished MA dissertations examining aspects of the Terror's history.⁶⁶ Both the IES and the 'Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum' in Addis Ababa also hold collections of visual sources from the time. The National Archive and Library

of Ethiopia (NALE) offers access to the records from the Ministry of Interior under the Derg and is in the process of cataloguing these. Meanwhile, perhaps the most remarkable collection of files related to the Red Terror is currently not available to the public: the archives of the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO), established after the fall of the Derg to prosecute its human rights abuses, contains an unparalleled collection of official documents and witness statements gathered for the purposes of the trials. While Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had issued a directive to make this archive public in 2009, its only materials currently available to researchers are those reproduced in the SPO's publications.⁶⁷

Outside Ethiopia the Library of Congress (LoC) in Washington, D.C. has acquired the Thomas L. Kane collection on Ethiopian studies, which is as insightful on the period of the Red Terror as it is on Ethiopian history more generally. The collection contains a range of news items and of underground, labour union and student movement papers; grey literature reports on the Red Terror; and all publications by the Derg's 'Revolution Information Centre'. At the UK National Archives at Kew, record groups FCO 31 and 58 contain regular accounts of the political situation from the British Embassy in Ethiopia, as well as reports by and about some of the 700 British citizens that resided in Ethiopia during the Terror. And in Germany, both the Bundesarchiv and the Archives of the BStU, which is entrusted with overseeing the files of the East German state security service, shed light on collaborations between the Derg and the socialist bloc. The British and German archives also raise the prospect of further materials waiting to be studied in other West and Eastern European as well as in Cuban state archives.

Online archives are as yet of limited use for the study of the Red Terror. Two are worth mentioning: the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) contains regular summaries of news from and about Ethiopia, including occasional transcripts of radio broadcasts not available elsewhere. And the LoC's digital Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection contains

interviews with senior American diplomats who served in the Horn, many among whom reflect on their experiences of the Red Terror.

Further Reading

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