

6. THE RED TERROR

The Red Terror was a campaign of urban counter-insurgency waged in the main cities of Ethiopia, notably Addis Ababa, between 1976 and 1978. The name "Red Terror" was officially used by the government, and it accurately reflects the way in which excessive violence was used to terrify the population and eliminate dissent. It was one of the most systematic uses of mass murder by the state ever witnessed in Africa.

The number who died in the Red Terror is not known -- it is certainly well in excess of 10,000. A full treatment of the Red Terror would require a separate and extremely lengthy report. What follows here is merely a cursory examination, in order to place the episode in the context of the Ethiopian government's counter-insurgency methods.

The Urban Opposition

In the 1960s and 1970s, opposition to the rule of Haile Selassie crystallized among the educated, particularly university students. These students were attracted by left wing political philosophy and nursed grievances over their living and studying conditions, the lack of a student union and student publications, and the shortage of career opportunities for them following graduation. This led directly to support for violent methods to overthrow the government. Student songs praised Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, and a popular slogan was "Through Bale not Bole," referring to the expectation that revolutionary change would occur through rural insurrection (as in Bale) and not through returning exiles (who arrive in Addis Ababa through Bole International Airport).¹

Reflecting pre-existing divisions in the student movement, after the revolution, splits soon appeared between different radical elements. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was one group, the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (known by its Amharic acronym, MEISON) was another. There were some important tactical differences between EPRP and MEISON, notably over the Eritrean question,² but their political programs both espoused an almost indistinguishable brand of Marxism. By 1976, the chief difference was that MEISON was prepared to cooperate with the military government to achieve communism, whereas the EPRP was not -- indeed it was ready to wage urban guerrilla warfare in order to bring down the

¹ Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*, E. Lansing, Mich., 1985.

² EPRP was prepared to allow the Eritreans to exercise a greater degree of self-determination.

Dergue. In the popular perception, MEISON also came to be identified as a predominantly Oromo organization, and EPRP as predominantly Amhara -- perceptions that became self-fulfilling.

In mid-1976, responding to a government crackdown on student members of the opposition, the EPRP began to assassinate leading members of the Dergue and its client institutions, notably the urban dwellers' associations (*kebeles*).³ The EPRP was suspected of complicity in a failed coup attempt in July 1976. 21 coup plotters were executed, and arrests of EPRP members began in August. On September 23, there was the first of nine officially listed assassination attempts on Mengistu. On October 2, the EPRP assassinated Fikre Merid, a leading MEISON and government cadre. Ten senior government officials and 15 members of the secret service were killed in the next two months. The public assassinations continued into 1977; several hundred were probably killed in this way, though some of the murders attributed to EPRP may not in fact have been carried out by that organization, but either by private individuals or by government agents.

The Red Terror: The First Wave

The killing of people suspected to be members of the EPRP began in September 1976. 21 were executed on October 21 and the deaths of a further 17 were announced on November 18. However, it was not until the killing of Gen. Teferi Bante by Mengistu in February 1977, and the latter's assumption of supreme power that the Red Terror was officially declared, and the mass killings began. Mengistu labelled the EPRP's sporadic campaign of assassination the "White Terror" and Lt-Col. Atnafu Abate promised "for every revolutionary killed, a thousand counter-revolutionaries executed."⁴ The promised ratio was not to be much of an exaggeration. Atnafu began organizing "Defense of the Revolution Squads," distributing arms to Addis Ababa *kebele* members who were considered to be loyal. In a public speech on April 17, Mengistu called upon the people to fight against the "enemies of the revolution" and smashed three bottles filled with blood (or something resembling blood) to signify the impending destruction of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism.

On February 26, 44 prisoners were taken to a place outside Addis Ababa and executed. On March 2, 1977, several people were shot dead by government forces for distributing EPRP

³ The following account relies heavily on: Rene LeFort, *Ethiopia: An Heretical Revolution?* London, 1983.

⁴ LeFort, 1983, p. 199. In November 1977, Atnafu was one of the revolutionaries to be killed -- on the orders of his longstanding friend, Mengistu.

literature during a pro-government demonstration.⁵ Over a thousand were detained during searches of the city on March 23-27. May Day had become the occasion for revolutionary groups to demonstrate their popular support, and EPRP planned to stage large rallies. Starting on the night of April 29, rural Defense Squads arrived in the capital, and, together with local kebele officials and soldiers, began a massacre of suspected EPRP supporters. The official government estimate is that 732 were killed over the next few days. Others believe the figure was in fact 2,000 or more.⁶ On May 7-8, a daytime curfew was instituted and house-to-house searches were conducted, with thousands being arbitrarily detained by Defense Squads and soldiers. On May 17, the Secretary-General of Swedish Save the Children Fund stated that "one thousand children have been massacred in Addis Ababa and their bodies, lying in the streets, are ravaged by roving hyenas." He estimated that 100-150 young people -- some as young as 12 -- were being killed every night.⁷ On the night of June 4/5, about 400 students were killed. In total, at least 2,500 were killed in this first phase of the terror.

Bodies were left on the roadside to advertise the killings of the previous night -- those who inspected the piles of bodies to see if their friends or relatives were among the corpses were targetted for execution or imprisonment themselves. Relatives were forbidden to mourn. In other cases, relatives had to pay one Ethiopian dollar for each "wasted bullet" in order to have the body returned.

There were also mass arrests of suspected EPRP supporters. Many of those arrested were subjected to torture, and many "disappeared" after spending some time in detention. Relatives were usually allowed to bring food and clothing to detainees, and learned of the detainees' transfer from one prison to another when the prison guards instructed them to take their food elsewhere. Similarly, they learned of the death or disappearance of their detained relative when the guards told them that it was no longer necessary to bring food. In some instances, the prison authorities deceived the relatives, and continued to accept food for weeks or months after the detainee had died or been executed.

Rene LeFort described the typical profile of the victim: "Simply knowing how to read and write and being aged about 20 or less were enough to define the potential or actual 'counter-revolutionary.' The authorities were even able to institute a law authorizing the arrest of children between eight and twelve years."⁸

⁵ Amnesty International, Human Rights Violations in Ethiopia, November 1978, p. 14.

⁶ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 14; LeFort, 1983, p. 201.

⁷ Amnesty International, 1978, pp. 14-15.

⁸ LeFort, 1983, p. 202.

The Red Terror: The Second and Third Waves

The EPRP was largely crushed in Addis Ababa by the first wave of the Red Terror, and retreated to a rural base in Tigray. However, the killings and arrests continued. Though the ostensible target remained the EPRP, the Dergue was now turning on kebele members suspected to be more loyal to MEISON than the Dergue, and on MEISON itself. Haile Fida, the leader of MEISON and confidante and ideologue of Mengistu, was detained in August 1977. After spending several months in prison, he disappeared. Many other MEISON cadres were arrested shortly afterwards. In October the second wave of arrests and executions took place, during which time an estimated 3,000-4,000 people were killed.

Much of the killing in October was conducted not by the Defense Squads and army, but in the course of a civil war between MEISON and the remnants of the EPRP. Both organizations had been thoroughly infiltrated by security agents, who were able to assassinate cadres of the opposing organization, while disclaiming government responsibility for the act. The continued killings by ostensible members of EPRP also created a justification for the Dergue's continuing repression.

By the end of 1977, MEISON members had been thoroughly purged from the ranks of government and the higher offices of the kebeles. However, many remained at the lower levels, especially in the provinces.

The third wave of the Red Terror took place between December 1977 and February 1978. 300 were killed on the night of December 16. On December 21, Defense Squad members opened fire with machine guns on people praying in a mosque. One Ethiopian estimated that during this phase 25-30 people were killed in an "ordinary" day.⁹ By the end of the year, Amnesty International estimated that 30,000 political detainees were held in the central prisons and the detention centers of the 291 kebeles of Addis Ababa.¹⁰ This figure must be considered a very cautious estimate because of the large numbers held in provincial towns.

By this time, the killings were less public. Most were executed in prison, and few bodies were left on the streets. However, the killings were at least as frequent as before. Perhaps 5,000 were killed in Addis Ababa in these months, and many more in provincial towns.

Though most of the killings -- at least in Addis Ababa -- were over by March 1978, detentions and executions continued throughout the year.

⁹ Babile Tola, To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia, Washington D.C., 1989, p. 144.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, 1978, p. 8.

The Campaign Against the Merchants

A significant minority of those killed or detained during the mid 1970s were traders and shopkeepers. This group, and in particular grain traders, were targets of the new government from 1975. While the campaign against the merchants -- like the corresponding campaign against landlords -- was not strictly part of the Red Terror, it deserves discussion, especially in the light of the 1980s famines.

Grain merchants were blamed in part for the famines of 1972-4, and seen as class enemies of the revolution. Many large merchants fled abroad when the radical political leanings of the Dergue became clear, or joined one of the conservative political-military resistance movements, such as the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) which was militarily active in Tigray and Gonder.

In 1973, 90 per cent of all marketed grain was sold through an estimated 20,000-30,000 grain merchants. A small minority of 25 dominated the supply to Addis Ababa, owning a storage capacity of 100,000 tonnes between them.¹¹ This latter group was certainly able to engineer shortages in the city, though in 1973 their chief contribution to famine appears to have been to facilitate the export of grain from famine-stricken Wollo to more prosperous Addis Ababa, where food prices rose a mere 20 per cent during the scarcity. Over 75 per cent of grain traders were rurally based and operated using pack animals. While these traders drove hard bargains and occasionally reaped windfall profits, they operated in a highly uncertain commercial environment, and performed an essential service in the redistribution of food.

The Special Penal Code of November 1974 included an article prohibiting economic actions which might create or aggravate famine, implicitly equating them with an attack on the state itself. Article 27 was drafted in a vague and ambiguous manner, which was open to a variety of interpretations. The Special Court Martial, instituted at the same time, implemented the law in a draconian manner, and on the occasions when a conviction could not be guaranteed, the Dergue was ready to bypass the courts altogether. Article 27 therefore acted as a powerful deterrent to legitimate as well as illegal economic activity. It is worth quoting in full, to illustrate the vague but intensely threatening environment in which traders were compelled to operate.

Article 27: Jeopardising Defensive Power of the State, Distress or Famine.

- (1) Whosoever intentionally by commission or omission directly or indirectly with culpable negligence commits any prejudicial act leading to the consequence of

¹¹ J. Holmberg, Grain Marketing and Land Reform in Ethiopia: An Analysis of the Marketing and Pricing of Food Grains in 1976 after the Land Reform, Uppsala, 1977, p. 9.

weakening the defensive power of the State or being aware of such a fact fails to do whatever in his capability or creates within the country a grave state of misery, want or famine, epidemic or epizootic disease or distress, especially by improperly hiding or hoarding, destroying or preventing the transport or distribution of grain, foodstuffs or provisions, or remedies or products necessary to the life and health of man or domestic animals, or where the occurrence of any imminent danger of distress or famine having shown a sign, fails to do whatever in his power to control it, is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from ten years to life, and where the offence was intentional and where death has occurred or many lives have perished the penalty may be death.

- (2) Whosoever, in time of such distress, fails to carry out or carries out improperly, except in the case of force majeure, the obligations or liabilities incumbent upon him, whether as a purveyor, middleman, sub-contractor, carrier or agent, or in any other capacity, in respect to the delivery or handing over of provisions, remedies or any other products to be used to prevent, limit or arrest the distress, is liable to the same punishments.
- (3) Where the offender has acted for gain, a fine not exceeding twenty thousand [Ethiopian] dollars shall be imposed in addition to the penalty prescribed in sub-article (2) hereof.

Many grain merchants were detained and their goods and vehicles confiscated. Others withdrew from the grain trade, fearing the same actions. With no state-run alternative distribution in place, the decline in the private grain trade contributed to rapid food price inflation and shortages in Addis Ababa.

The Dergue did not consider these legal prohibitions comprehensive enough. In July 1976, the Special Penal Code was revised and reissued. The same provisions remained, but an additional one was added. Article 17(A) concerned "economic sabotage" and prescribed the death penalty for actions leading to the destruction or withholding of grain, interruption of work or transport, or "any other similar act."

Immediately after the revised Special Penal Code was promulgated, seven Addis Ababa grain merchants were charged under this new article, and sentenced to long prison terms. General Teferi Bante, then head of state, intervened and changed several of the sentences to death. One of those executed for "economic crimes" had been caught with 20 tons of grain in stock -- four trucks full, and scarcely enough to influence the price of grain in a city of over one million residents. The others had been found with stores of the spice berbere.

An additional motivation for the increased pressure on private grain merchants in 1976 was that in that year the government set up the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was to have a monopoly on large-scale grain transactions. Coercion was needed to enforce the monopoly.

In the provinces a large number of merchants were executed in 1976-8. Every small town has stories of traders being killed by firing squads, thrown into trenches, doused with petrol and burned, or disappearing while in detention.

A number of other measures were implemented to humiliate and punish merchants. Many of these consisted of macabre dramas orchestrated by kebele officials, in which the poor exacted revenge on their previous oppressors. Merchants were required to participate in auctions, at which an ordinary object -- an egg, a cup of coffee, or a framed photograph of Mengistu -- would be bid for. Each participant would be obliged to outbid the others, from fear of a severe punishment. The price might reach five thousand Ethiopian dollars (or, after the 1976 currency change, Birr) before the auctioneers were satisfied. In some instances, the object of the auction was the right to administer strokes with a whip on the back of another merchant.

This campaign against traders, which continued well into the 1980s (see subsequent chapters) was to have a profound negative impact on rural people's ability to withstand adversity.

The Red Terror in the Provinces

While the killings and detentions were most numerous and most publicized in Addis Ababa, the campaign was also conducted throughout the country, mostly during 1978. Young people in towns such as Asmara, Gonder, Bahir Dar and Jimma are known to have suffered severely. One document detailing the Red Terror gives information on the following incidents:¹²

- * Debre Markos, Gojjam: massacres in October 1976, February, June and August 1977.
- * Dessie and Kombolcha, Wollo: batches of prisoners executed.
- * Gonder, Harerghe, Sidamo, Bale, May 1-15, 1977: 1,713 executed, according to the government.
- * Gonder, November 1977: 54 killed when security forces opened fire on an EPRP demonstration.
- * Before December 1977: 56 prisoners killed in Tigray, 74 in Wollo, 32 in Chebo and Gurage (Shewa), and 56 in Gonder.

During 1978, the government instituted a purge of the leadership of Peasant Associations, replacing the popularly-elected leaders with government appointees. Though not

¹² Babile Tola, 1989, pp. 143-4.

as bloody as the urban terror, this purge was accompanied by many detentions and some executions.

Next to Addis Ababa, the Red Terror was the worst in Tigray. Three different armed opposition movements were active in Tigray at the time -- the EDU, with support from feudal lords and large traders, the EPRP, and the TPLF, which succeeded in capturing the headquarters of Tembien district, Abi Adi, in early 1977. In Meqele, the provincial capital, students, merchants and rural people suspected of supporting the TPLF were all equally targets. The following case is an instance of a student suspected of supporting all three rebel organizations, who was examined by Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, a physician, in Sudan in January 1986:

T.H. was one of 300 plus young men who had been educated by Ras Mengesha,¹³ a Tigrayan from Tembien; he had worked in Addis as an agricultural expert. In 1978 he was imprisoned in the house which the Emperor had given to [a British professor] together with 470 other unfortunates. He was accused of belonging to the EPRP. He was tortured: electrical prods and burns to the soles of his feet and flogging of the back, both of which left terrible scars when I saw him in '86. When they found no evidence, they changed tack and accused him of being a member of the TPLF, because he was from Tigray. More torture. He was released after six months, and after an adventurous flight via Meqele, from where he escaped dressed as a poor shepherd, he got to the Sudan. He still has problems walking.

Smaller towns in Tigray suffered too. There, the atrocities of the Red Terror followed on without a break from the violence against civilians that was a normal part of counter-insurgency in the preceding years. The following account of killings was given by Woreda Teka, a farmer and trader and member of Abi Adi *hainto* (council), to visitors in 1988.¹⁴ It is indicative of the many atrocities that occurred in small towns without gaining any publicity.

Well, to go back to the beginning, the first incident was a massacre by government troops. This was in June 1976: 180 people were lined up in the square (it was market day) and machine-gunned.¹⁵ I remember it was about 11 a.m. There had been a battle with the TPLF a few days before this, and the soldiers said they were executing bandits [*wunbede*]. In fact they just came into the market and rounded up anyone they could find. About a quarter of those shot were women: one had a baby who survived, and we found it alive and still feeding half an hour after she had been killed. There were about 5-600 soldiers in the town that year. They arrived in April and stayed until October when there was another battle. They did have food of their own but kept coming round for extra money.

The soldiers returned in April [1977] and in August they killed four people at the town

¹³ Former governor of Tigray and leader of the EDU.

¹⁴ Interview conducted by Sarah Vaughan and Gerry McCann, two visitors to Tigray, November 1988.

¹⁵ Other sources give slightly different numbers: 160 total, or 149 peasants and 19 students (total 168).

clinic. They said they were TPLF leaders, and were organizing resistance, but we all knew who they were -- one was a trader and the other three were peasants.

The next year was the time of the Red Terror, and there was a whole brigade [1,000-1,500 soldiers] in the area: there were *banda* [locally-recruited mercenaries] and militia as well as regular army, and they held the mountains all around here. On 29 January 1978 they killed seven people in their homes with no explanation. They didn't even allow the families to touch the bodies for a whole day -- they were just left outside the houses as a warning. Anyone caught mourning those was put in prison. The victims were:

- * Techane Hagos, 28, who worked in the local government finance office.
- * Lowul Hagos, 25, his brother and a peasant farmer.
- * Azanua, 32, originally from Gonder, working in the sanitation department.
- * Abdel Hakim, 18, a ninth grade student.
- * Three other students from Hagerai Selam whose names I do not know.

The residents of Abi Adi erected a monument to commemorate those killed in the massacre of June 1976. Each time the army occupied the town, the monument was destroyed. Each time the garrison left, the residents rebuilt it.

Impact of the Red Terror

Nobody knows how many people were killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad on account of the Red Terror. A minimum of 10,000 were killed in Addis Ababa alone in 1977, and probably a comparable number in the provinces in 1977 and 1978. A larger number were detained, and subjected to appalling prison conditions and torture. An even larger number became refugees.

The main target of the Red Terror was a generation of urban people with at least minimal education. That generation was lost -- many physically removed, with the remainder so cowed and terrified that any expression of dissent in Addis Ababa was unthinkable for a decade. EPRP members and sympathizers, and others with a similar social or educational profile, were left with a bitter hatred of the Dergue. However, the EPRP and MEISON were essentially crushed. Over the following 13 years the EPRP engaged in armed opposition in rural areas but never regained its preeminence, and MEISON became almost completely defunct.

Rene LeFort commented:

History offers few examples of revolutions that have devoured their own children with such viciousness and so much cruelty. It can be estimated that, of ten civilians who had actively worked for a radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination. The revolution swallowed the whole

of the young generation of Ethiopian intellectuals, that is literates.¹⁶

A class of merchants was also lost in the Red Terror and the year preceding it. Most of those who survived were either forced out of business or withdrew from fear of reprisals. While the numbers of merchants killed or detained does not approach the tens of thousands of young educated victims, this class has a special significance, because its absence contributed to the famines of the 1980s.

In Tigray, the Red Terror encompassed groups not included in these two classes. Peasants and uneducated townspeople suffered too. Like the EPRP sympathizers, almost all Tigrayans were left with a deep hatred of the government. Unlike the EPRP, however, their resistance was not crushed. The TPLF was battered by the events of 1976-8, but survived and gained popular support. The Dergue was to find that peasant resistance was harder to crush than urban insurrection.

A final consequence of the Red Terror was that it led the Dergue directly to an addiction to rule by terror. In terms of crushing the threat from the EPRP, the Red Terror was a complete success. It was an apparent vindication of the use of indiscriminate and exemplary violence as a counter-insurgency method.

¹⁶ LeFort, 1983, p. 257.