

Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky 1877-1926. 'Be sharp-eyed and diligent!'

Emergence of Terror

Felix Dzerzhinsky: 'The public and the press misunderstand the character and tasks of our commission. They imagine the struggle waged against Counter Revolution to be on the plane of normal state life, and consequently they wail about courts of law, about guarantees, about inquiries, investigators etc...We stand for organised terror – this should be frankly stated.'

Richard Pipes sees the willful repression of all potential and apparent opponents as the principle Bolshevik intention in forming the Cheka: '...the "Red Terror" was not a reluctant response to the actions of others but a prophylactic measure designed to nip in the bud any thoughts of resistance to the dictatorship.'¹⁷ The Bolsheviks certainly did much to provoke resistance to their regime. Yet the Cheka's purpose extended beyond its role as an agency of state coercion. Furthermore, historians have debated the extent to which circumstances, counter-revolutionary threat and ideological considerations drove the terror. The violence of the Civil War, both Red and White, was of complex origin and development.

By March 1918 the Cheka had moved to its Lubyanka headquarters in Moscow and under the leadership of 'Iron Felix' Dzerzhinsky had grown to a staff of over 1000 with its own military Combat Detachment. It was not, however, well organised or centrally controlled. Local Cheka authorities, like other Soviet bodies, had considerable autonomy in the early months of Bolshevik rule. In this regard, Orlando Figes has stressed the manner in which Red Terror developed in response to popular pressure. Russia's privileged classes were the target of much hatred and violence during the Civil War period. Denunciations by ordinary members of the community, both in urban centers and countryside, influenced who was targeted by the provincial Cheka. The Bolshevik authorities endorsed these sentiments; a 'class war' was seen as an intrinsic part of the revolution. One of Dzerzhinsky's deputies, Martyn Latsis, issued the following instructions to his officials regarding the interrogation of prisoners: 'First you must ask him to what class he belongs, what his social origin is, his education and profession. These are the questions that must determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning of the Red Terror.'¹⁸ Another Chekist expressed an even simpler method: 'What purpose is served by all these questions of origins and education? One needs only to go into the kitchen and look into his soup pot. If there is meat in it, then he is an enemy of the people. Stand him up against the wall!'¹⁹

For all the Communist rhetoric of revolutionary violence and anti-bourgeois sentiment, it was not until after mid-1918 that the Red Terror took on the more organised and fearsome character with which it is most commonly associated. In June 1918, Dzerzhinsky warned, 'We stand for organised terror...The Cheka is obliged to defend the revolution and conquer the enemy even if its sword does by chance sometimes fall on the heads of the innocent.'²⁰

The sense that the Bolsheviks were under attack from not only White armies but also dangerous political terrorists was made clear after Lenin was shot and seriously wounded by SR Fanya Kaplan on 30 August 1918. On the same day Petrograd Cheka boss, Moisei Uritsky, was assassinated by a young military cadet. The death of Uritsky and the attempt on Lenin's life were

greeted with outrage by the Bolsheviks, providing them with justification for escalating the Red Terror. One Party newspaper, *Krasnaia Gazeta*, proclaimed: 'Without mercy, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands, let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritsky...let there be floods of bourgeois blood – more blood, as much as possible.'²¹

The Bolsheviks subsequently launched a war on terror that was to be won by even greater, more violent terror. In Lenin's absence, Yakov Sverdlov and Dzerzhinsky directed Sovnarkom to pass a decree, 'On Red Terror', on 5 September. The decree allowed for the creation of concentration camps to imprison 'class enemies' and authorised the Cheka to execute 'anyone involved in White Guard organisations, conspiracies and rebellions.'²²



Lenin addressing a crowd of workers in Moscow, 30 August 1918, where an assassination attempt was made. Painting by M. Sokolov.

The assassination attempt on Lenin was blamed not just on SR terrorists but also the bourgeoisie. Another of Dzerzhinsky's deputies declared: 'The bullet was directed not only against Comrade Lenin but also the working-class as a whole.'²³ Thousands of suspected 'counter-revolutionaries', many from the middle and upper classes, were now arrested and incarcerated in concentration camps and Cheka jails. Thousands were likewise summarily executed. Latsis explained, 'We are not waging war against individual persons. We are exterminating the bourgeoisie as a class.'²⁴

Methods of terror

Tales of the tortures inflicted by Chekists abound and raise serious doubts as to whether the perpetrators were mentally stable. One Cheka executioner liked to shoot his victims bit by bit, starting at the wrist and ending at the head...taking a sniff of cocaine between each shot. The Kharkov Cheka preferred the 'glove trick' where the hand of a prisoner was held in boiling water until the skin came off 'like a glove'. In Voronezh prisoners were rolled about in spiked barrels. In Tsaritsyn and Kamyshin they used blunt saws to sever the bones of prisoners. In Kiev, pipes filled with rats and sealed at

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DID YOU KNOW?

On August 30 Chairman of the Soviet CEC, Yakov Sverdlov, published an 'Appeal in Connection with the Attempt on the Life of Lenin' that summed up the mood amongst Communist leaders: 'The working class will answer assassination attempts on its leaders by still greater consolidation of its forces and by ruthless mass terror against all enemies of the Revolution... Maintain order and organisation! Everybody must remain at their posts! Close ranks!'

¹⁷ Richard Pipes, *Three Whys of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 41.

¹⁸ Cited in Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 534.

¹⁹ Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 140.

²⁰ Cited in Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police: Muscovite, Imperial and Soviet Political Security Operations 1565-1970* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), 122.

²¹ Cited in Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 630.

²² Cited in Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: A New Biography* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 234.

²³ Cited in B. Lincoln, *Red Victory*, 158.

²⁴ Cited in George Leggett, 'The Vecheka' in Harold Shukman (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1988), 182.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Dzerzhinsky's body was reportedly covered in scars from the tortures he received in prison under the Tsar. Is this where he learned torture methods?

²⁵ Cited in R. Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 224.

EXECUTION OF THE TSAR AND HIS FAMILY

On 17 July 1918, Tsar Nicholas II and his family were killed by Cheka authorities in the basement of the house in which they were imprisoned at Yekaterinberg in Siberia. It was at first believed that local officials had acted on their own in disposing of the Romanovs, to ensure the family was not liberated by advancing anti-Bolshevik forces. However, evidence suggests that Sverdlov, with the blessing of Lenin, had telegraphed an order to the Chekists to go ahead with the executions. The official who directed the Yekaterinberg Cheka was a personal friend of Sverdlov and had been in frequent contact with him before the murders.¹ When Trotsky asked who ordered the executions, Sverdlov replied, 'We decided it here. Ilyich believed that we should not leave the Whites a live banner to rally around.'² Trotsky later recognised that the execution of the Romanovs had a deeper message; there was to be no turning back and no mercy for the enemies of the new regime: 'The execution of the Tsar and his family was needed not only to frighten, horrify and instill a sense of hopelessness in the enemy, but also to shake up our own ranks, to show that there was no retreating, that ahead lay total victory or total doom.'³ In December 2000, Nicholas II and his immediate family were canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church.



The Russian Royal family.

¹ D. Volkogonov, *Lenin*, 210–213.

² Cited in Adam Ulam, *Lenin and the Bolsheviks* (London: Fontana Library, 1969), 559.

³ Cited in Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread* (London: Vintage, 2003), 54.

one end were placed against a victim's stomach and heated up. Desperate to escape, the rats would gnaw into the prisoner's body. White officers had their epaulettes nailed into their shoulders or were 'roasted' against the side of ships' furnaces. Sometimes psychological torture could be just as damaging. The Kiev Chekists were known to have put prisoners into coffins with a rotting corpse, bury them alive, then dig them up half an hour later. A subtle but equally distressing practice was to bring a prisoner into the execution room and fire an empty pistol at their head. They were then returned to their cell and left to wonder when their 'real' execution would occur – if at all. For all the sickening and extravagant ways of inflicting pain and death, the most common method of execution was a pistol shot fired at point blank range to the back of the head.

These executions and tortures had a brutalising and mentally damaging effect on the Chekists themselves. A considerable number of Chekists went insane. Cocaine and alcohol abuse was high amongst members of the political police. A delivery of liquor to a Cheka headquarters was seen as a sign of upcoming executions. Most executions were carried out in the privacy of Cheka jails, although that did nothing to diminish the fear they instilled. Lists of those killed were regularly published in newspapers. The Commissar of Justice argued, 'We must execute not only the guilty. Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more.'²⁵

Justifications for terror

Was mass terror, as the Commissar of Justice implied, simply an end in itself? Or should we take seriously Dzerzhinsky's claim that executions would somehow lead to socialism? A number of Chekists were mentally unstable and got perverse pleasure from torture and killing. One expressed enthusiasm for his work through poetry:

There is no greater joy, not better music
Than the crunch of broken lives and bones
This is why when our eyes are languid
And passion begins to seethe stormily in the breast,
I want to write on your sentence
One unquavering thing: 'Up against the wall! Shoot!'²⁶

Men like Martyn Latsis and Felix Dzerzhinsky were at once fanatics and idealists. They considered the task entrusted to them to be of the utmost importance. In explaining the role of the Cheka, Dzerzhinsky said,

We need to send to the front – the most dangerous and cruel of fronts – determined, hard, dedicated comrades ready to do anything in defence of the Revolution. Do not think that I seek forms of revolutionary justice; we are not now in need of justice. It is war now – face to face, a fight to the finish. Life or death!²⁷

Dzerzhinsky saw membership of the Cheka as a kind of higher calling: 'To be a Chekist a man must have a clear mind, a passionate heart, and clean hands. A Chekist must be more honest and trustworthy than the average. He must be as pure as crystal.'²⁸ Dzerzhinsky saw his role as the unshakable guardian of the revolution. His Chekists were likewise seen as chivalrous crusaders; the so-called 'sword and flame of the revolution.' Working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, Dzerzhinsky possessed an austere dedication to 'the cause'. He was known to have remained at his unheated Lubyanka office for days on end. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, he commonly slept with just his greatcoat as a blanket. His workload brought on ill-health and was the cause of much worry amongst other Bolsheviks. In the worst period of shortage during the Civil War, Dzerzhinsky chastised colleagues who brought him a meal of bacon and potatoes rather than horsemeat (a common source of food at the time). He often lived off mint tea and bread. Chamberlin described Dzerzhinsky as, '...an old revolutionary of the most unimpeachable idealism.'²⁹ Similarly, revisionist historian Neil Harding argues, 'There was about him no hint of personal corruption or self-interested abuse of his massive powers.'³⁰ A good many rank-and-file Chekists, however, did not adopt Dzerzhinsky's Spartan virtuousness. Corruption was rampant. In response, Iron Felix was known to have ordered the execution of Chekists who took bribes and deducted alimony from the pay of his employees who were unfaithful to their wives.

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ACTIVITY 4**Debate**

Using this book and at least THREE other sources, research the Red Terror. Run a class debate on ONE of the topics below. Appoint an adjudicator, affirmative and negative teams and follow formal debating methods.

- Iron Felix and the Cheka were sadistic lunatics.
- The Red Terror proved Bukharin's saying: 'you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.'
- The Bolsheviks had to use terror: it was a weapon of war.

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DID YOU KNOW?

The character Pasha Antipov in Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* had similarities with Iron Felix. Driven by a hatred of those who exploit the poor and brutalised by his experiences in World War I, Pasha became the dreaded Bolshevik Commissar, Strelnikov ('the Shooter'). 'These are apocalyptic times, my dear sir, this is the Last Judgement,' he says to Dr Zhivago. 'This is a time for angels with flaming swords and winged beasts from the abyss, not for sympathisers and loyal doctors.' This echoed Dzerzhinsky's purist, almost religious, commitment to the revolution.

²⁶ Cited in Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen: An Authoritative Portrait of a Tyrant and Those Who Served Him* (London: Viking, 2004), 76.

²⁷ Cited by O. Figeas, *A People's Tragedy*, 510.

²⁸ Cited by Norman Friedman, *The Cold War Experience* (London: Carlton Books, 2005), 27.

²⁹ W. H. Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution II*, 76.

³⁰ Neil Harding, 'Review: The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police by George Leggett' in *International Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Royal Institute of International Affairs, Spring 1982), 351–2.

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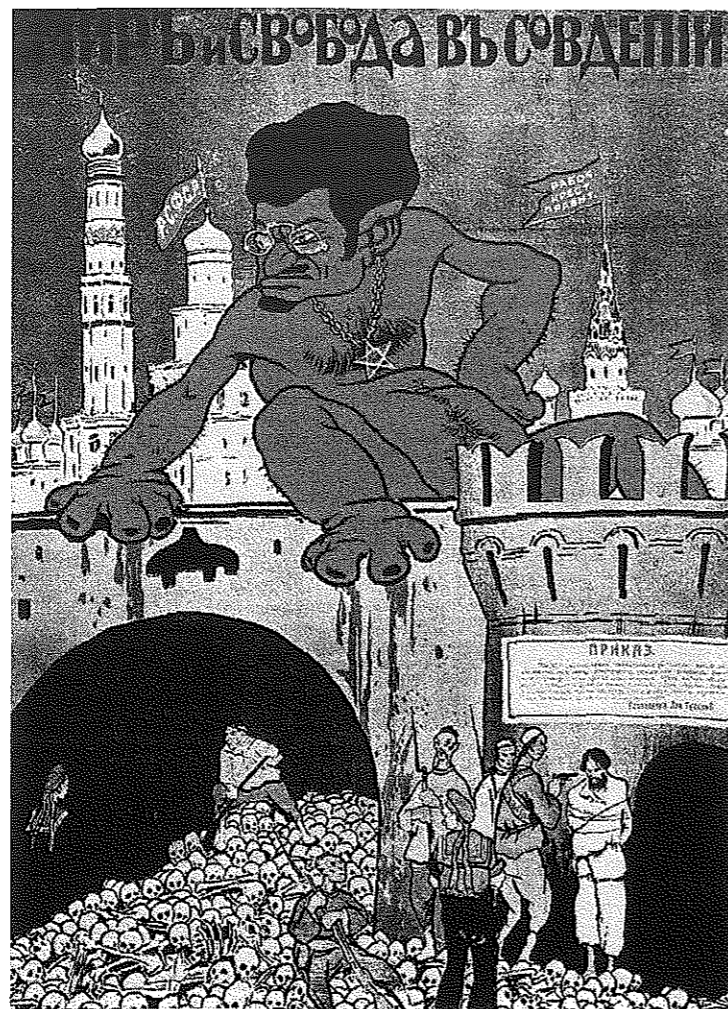
DID YOU KNOW?

As revolutionary Marxists, the Bolsheviks renounced any religious identity. When asked by a delegation of Jews to help his 'fellows', Trotsky is reported to have snapped, 'I am not a Jew but an internationalist!' As Moscow's Chief Rabbi once observed, it was the Trotskys of the world who made revolutions, but the Bronsteins (Trotsky's real surname) who had to live with them.

White Terror

White Terror, often overlooked in accounts of the revolution, was similarly brutal and unrelenting. The Whites nailed suspected Communists by their left hand and left foot to trees with railway spikes. 'Socialist' workers (sometimes merely trade unionists) were buried in the ground up to their necks and ridden over by cavalry. Captured Red soldiers had stars carved into their backs, their limbs hacked off, or were buried head-down with the bottom half of their legs exposed. On hearing that Bolsheviks killed those with clean fingernails and smooth hands, one White commander captured a factory and ordered the execution of any employee with calloused hands.

Pogroms against Jewish communities were a further insidious expression of White Terror. As a means to 'let off steam', White generals were known to grant their soldiers two or three days leave to loot Jewish homes and businesses at will. In the Ukraine over 100 000 Jews were murdered. Thousands more were beaten and raped. Whereas the Communists persecuted the bourgeoisie as the defenders of old regime, the Whites targeted Jews as scapegoats for all the perceived wrongs of the revolutionary regime. Former Duma deputy and White supporter, Vasili Shulgín, explained:



'Peace and Liberty in Sovdepiya'. A White propaganda poster of 1919. Sovdepiya was a derogatory slang term that roughly translates as 'land of Soviet deputies'.

We reacted to the "Yids" just as the Bolsheviks reacted to the burzhoois. They shouted, "Death to the Burzhooi!" And we replied, "Death to the Yids!"³¹

Revolutionary fanaticism alone does not explain the dramatic growth of the Cheka. Dzerzhinsky was in demand as an administrator. He had a reputation as a man who could get the job done. In 1921 he was made Commissar of Transport and given the task of restoring Russia's crippled rail system. He was later appointed Chairman of the Supreme Economic Council (VSNKh). Like its founder, the Cheka was seen as versatile, efficient and useful to the new regime. As problems mounted and internal threats increased, many within the Party came to regard the political police as indispensable. Lenin gave his full support to Dzerzhinsky's work and overruled any attempts within the Party to curtail the Cheka. Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov argues, 'Lenin himself was the patron saint of the Cheka.'³² As a valued tool of the Soviet state the Cheka took on diverse tasks such as border control; overseeing labour conscription; fuel procurement; countering desertions; uncovering espionage and political dissent; exposing bribery and corruption; policing crime; and coordinating epidemic and famine relief.³³ In what some might see as a mismatch of interests, the founder of Soviet Russia's largest child welfare agency was Iron Felix Dzerzhinsky. Numerous homes

WAR AND TERROR

In his comparative history of the French and Russian revolutions, Arno J. Mayer emphasises the interrelationship between terror and the threat of military defeat. The fortunes of the Civil War strongly influenced the application of revolutionary violence. According to Mayer, throughout the Civil War, 'the bulk of the terror, and the worst of it, was closely correlated with the fighting between the Reds and Whites. It was much more a part of military operations than of political battles against real or perceived enemies and conspiracies.' Revolution often provokes its opposite – counter-revolution – and both forces throw all they have against the other. 'The Furies of revolution are fueled above all by the resistance of the forces and ideas opposed to it,' Mayer argues. Despite the Communists' predisposition toward revolutionary violence, without the threat of domestic resistance, profound social unrest, foreign intervention and assassinations by SR terrorists, the Red Terror would

have been, arguably, less forceful and uncompromising.

The extent to which terror came about in response to crises and threat or was a product of ideological intolerance remains an area of continued debate for historians. Rather than arguing the merits of circumstances versus intent, Peter Holquist calls for a consideration of Bolshevik policies within their 'historical conditions'.³ The authoritarian state institutions of the Civil War years can be seen as an extension of previous trends that predated the Bolsheviks. The period of 1905 to 1921 was an 'epoch of violence'. Communist mentality and practices, as well as the brutality of Terror, were a product of 'specific time and place', according to Holquist. In the midst of this time of troubles, the extreme means of wartime were seen as applicable to revolutionary ends.

¹ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 253.

² Peter Holquist, 'Violent Russia, Deadly Marxism? Russia in the Epoch of Violence, 1905-21', in *Kritika: Exploration in Russian and Eurasian History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2003), 628.

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DID YOU KNOW?

A telling example of the sheer callousness of the Red Terror is revealed through a misunderstanding between Lenin and Dzerzhinsky in 1919. During a Sovnarkom meeting Lenin passed Dzerzhinsky a note asking, 'How many dangerous counter-revolutionaries do we have in prison?' Dzerzhinsky wrote back: 'About 1,500'. Lenin drew a quick cross next to the figure, passed back the note, and returned his attention to the meeting. That night, Dzerzhinsky ordered 1500 prisoners from Moscow's Cheka jails to be executed. What Felix had forgotten was that Lenin drew a small cross next to everything he read to mark that he had understood and considered it!

³¹ Cited in O. Figs, *A People's Tragedy*, 677.

³² D. Volkogonov, *Lenin*, 238.

³³ G. Leggett, 'The Vecheka', 184.

for orphans were built from the proceeds of voluntary deductions from Chekists' salaries. Dzerzhinsky once told a fellow Chekist, 'Concern for our children's welfare is one of the best ways to wipe out counter-revolution.'²⁴