

# **Revolutionary Terror Campaigns in Addis Ababa, 1976-1978**

Jacob Wiebel  
St Cross College

Doctor of Philosophy in History  
University of Oxford  
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## **Abstract**

Between 1976 and 1978, urban Ethiopia became a site of collective violence. Rival campaigns of revolutionary terror were fought out, most notably in the capital city of Addis Ababa. Opposition forces launched targeted assassinations against the military regime and its collaborators, prompting the latter to widen early campaigns of repression into one of the most brutal reigns of state terror in modern Africa. Tens of thousands of Ethiopians, most of them young and many educated, lost their lives. Thousands more were systematically tortured or otherwise abused. Many escaped to the countryside or fled abroad, invigorating rural insurgencies and generating the country's first permanent diaspora. The Terror effected deep changes in Ethiopian state and society, as well as in relations between them. This thesis analyses the social and political history of this revolutionary violence. It brings materials familiar to scholars of modern Ethiopia together with new sources, from oral interviews to international archives. On the basis of these sources, the dynamics and aftereffects of the Ethiopian Terror are examined. Urban Ethiopia's revolutionary violence is shown to have been jointly produced by supralocal decision makers and by local actors, shaped by centrally imposed structures as much as by locally moulded operational cultures. Geo-political alliances in the context of the global Cold War had profound effects on the mode of violence on the ground. Underpinning this violence were evolving social processes and narratives that legitimised terror campaigns and depersonalised opponents. Unveiling these dynamics of violence, this thesis traces the changes in the Terror's forms and agents. The mode of state-instigated violence shifted significantly: it transitioned from unsystematic repression before February 1977 to a phase of decentralisation that lasted until July 1977, during which the means of state violence were devolved to local actors. It culminated in a centrally coordinated campaign of terror in late 1977 and early '78, which inscribed institutional structures and practices of collective violence into the state bureaucracy. Opposition violence, meanwhile, moved into the opposite direction, becoming increasingly localised and less subject to centralised control. Having surveyed these defining dynamics of revolutionary violence, the thesis traces their subsequent trajectories, highlighting the enduring repercussions of the Terror's legacies and of its contested memorialisation process for Ethiopian politics and society.

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## Glossary

Abyot Tebeka	Revolution Defense Squad
AETU	All Ethiopia Trade Union
CELU	Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions
E.C.	Ethiopian Calendar
EPRA	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ERIC	Ethiopian Revolution Information Center
ERTDRC	Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center
ESM	Ethiopian Student Movement
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
Ichat	Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle*
IES	Institute of Ethiopian Studies
Imaledh	Union of Marxist-Leninist Organisations of Ethiopia
Kebele	Urban Dweller Association; lowest administrative structure
Keftegna	'Higher' Urban Dweller Association, the administrative structure above Kebeles
Malerid	Marxist Leninist Revolutionary Organisation*
Meison	All Ethiopia Socialist Movement*
NALE	National Archives and Library of Ethiopia
NDR	National Democratic Revolution
PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Council
POMOA	Provision Office of Mass Organisational Affairs
Red Terror Museum	Red Terror Martyr's Memorial Museum, Addis Ababa
SPO	Special Prosecutor's Office
Wez League	The Labour League
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front

(\*) denotes Amharic acronyms

### **Note on Ethiopian names, words and dates**

In keeping with custom, Ethiopians are identified by their first name and father's name. Since they are not surnames per se, fathers' names are not privileged in footnotes or bibliography. Amharic words are transliterated into Latin script in the main body of the text. In footnotes and bibliography, however, they are written in Ge'ez script, except where a word - like *Kebele* - has become commonplace in English writing about Ethiopia. Translations are provided throughout. Where Ethiopian dates are cited, these are marked 'E.C.' and followed by their equivalent date in the Gregorian calendar.

## Chapter 1 - Theory and Contexts

### Approaching the Ethiopian Terror

By September 1976, talk of a bloodless Ethiopian revolution had become a distant and uncertain memory. A mere two years earlier the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie had been celebrated as the climax of a revolution *yale dam* - 'without blood'. But within weeks, the blood had begun to flow: in November 1974, prominent members of the *ancien régime* had been executed. Rural insurgencies and local opposition flared up across the country, sustaining a new revolutionary order which was, if anything, more bloody than its imperial predecessor. For most urban Ethiopians, violence became a regular feature of everyday life primarily due to the Terror that engulfed the country's cities and towns.

Addis Ababa in particular became a site of collective violence, as rival campaigns of revolutionary terror were fought out in the capital city. Members of the Derg, the group of military officers that had taken power in the 1974 revolution, and cadres of civilian organisations that were supporting the regime, were being assassinated by urban guerillas associated with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The regime in turn was executing youths it suspected of association with the clandestine party, while at the same time laying the groundwork for a more systematic and ruthless response to the urban challenge by the civilian left. The Terror penetrated every social group in Addis Ababa, leaving no neighbourhood untouched, no family uninvolved. As

the regime gradually gained the upper hand, the conflict evolved from a civil war into unrestrained state terror, culminating in the proclamation of the official 'Red Terror' at the end of 1977. The double helix of conflicts that defined the Terror years - one strand the confrontation between the military regime and its civilian opponents, the other the contest among the civilian opposition itself - claimed the lives of thousands of Ethiopians, most of them young and many educated.

Yet this was never merely a conflict between competing political groups. The violence was as much bottom-up as it was top-down. Local dynamics were absorbed into the conflict to the point where the politicisation of the private and the privatisation of the political became two sides of the same coin. As a result, the Terror years transformed not only the political but also the social and cultural landscapes of Ethiopia. No realm of urban life remained untouched by the period's violence, and its legacies affect Ethiopian state and society to this day. The Terror thus constituted both the climax of profound socio-political tensions and a major turning point in the history of modern Ethiopia.

### **The research question**

Yet this immense and tragic significance of the Terror is belied by an underdeveloped scholarship burdened with bias, limited scope and a reproduction of the polemics, accusations and justifications of the time. Such historical research as has been conducted has - reflecting the remaining trend toward state-centred political and military history in Ethiopian historiography - focused on prominent political actors and

events, leaving important questions concerning the social history of the Terror and concerning the local dynamics of violence unaddressed. As a result, our understanding of the Ethiopian Terror remains deficient, restricted to a narrow engagement with macro-political categories. Neither the social underpinnings nor the effects and memory of collective violence have received adequate attention. Research on the Ethiopian Terror is yet to be integrated into wider theoretical and comparative discussions, from which it has much to learn and to which it has much to contribute.

Writing in 1995, Jon Abbink raised a set of important questions concerning the social history of violence in the Ethiopian Terror:

What was gained by the torture and killing of children [aged] twelve, or of students who were seen as 'guilty' because of being young and being a student [sic]? Why strangle people with piano wire? Why expose the bodies of dead youths on the streets of the city for days, to be eaten by hyenas, and forbid their burial? How to explain the demand of the killers to the victims to first dig their own grave, and then be shot into it? Why were relatives ordered to look at the cuts and bullet-wounds on the bodies of their dead sons and daughters, and prohibited, under threat of torture, to shed tears or wear black mourning clothes? How to understand the demand of soldiers to the parents of victims to pay a substantial sum of money to them for the bullets they had fired into the body of their children?<sup>1</sup>

Two decades on, these questions still remain unanswered. Others could readily be added to the list: How did the violence erupt and engulf entire communities? What were its social and cultural meanings? Why was violence enacted in different ways and to varying extents in the many neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa? How did the

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1. Jon Abbink, 'The impact of violence: the Ethiopian "Red Terror" as a social phenomenon' in Peter J. Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser (eds.), *Krieg und Frieden: Ethnologische Perspektiven* (Kea Edition: Bremen, 1995), 137.

revolutionary situation relate to the outbreak of Terror? How did political organisations interact with local actors and agendas to shape realities on the ground? How did organisational structures shape perpetrators and their acts of violence? How was the violence experienced and conceptualised? What legacies did it leave? How has it been narrated, and which purposes have these narratives served?

These long-neglected questions in the history of Ethiopia's revolutionary Terror are the subject of this thesis. They all inquire into aspects of the Terror's collective violence. Since such violence is always culturally scripted, always socially and historically contingent, answers to these questions depend on a sound historiography of the Terror. This historiography, however, still remains in its early stages. The goal of this thesis is to augment the existing scholarship with original research in order to create a more developed and nuanced account of the Ethiopian Terror. In particular, greater attention will be paid to the relation between local and supra-local agendas, actors and actions. As Stathis Kalyvas observed, "accounting for violence requires that local dynamics be embedded in an analysis of [conflict] dynamics."<sup>2</sup> This is the task of this thesis.

### **Defining the Terror**

Before this task can be embarked upon, however, its boundaries need to be clearly defined. The period in question is commonly referred to, both colloquially and in academic literature, as the 'Red Terror'. As we shall see, the term rightly designates an

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2. Stathis Kalyvas, 'The ontology of "political violence": action and identity in civil wars', in *Perspectives on Politics*, vol.1, no.3 (2003), 481.

important aspect of the period. As a descriptive label for the urban conflicts that dominated the capital between 1976 and 1978, however, Red Terror is at once too narrow and too broad. It is too narrow because it was only consistently applied to the Derg's urban repression of late 1977 and early 1978. In this sense, the term fails to capture either the regime's earlier efforts at violently controlling the cities, or the civilian opposition's own assassination and terror campaigns. Indeed, we shall see that the term has a history of being invoked as much to conceal and exculpate particular groups and actions as to describe and denounce others. Red Terror as a label is also too broad, however, since it is frequently employed as a blanket term for all extrajudicial violence or disregard of human rights that occurred under the auspices of the Derg. In this usage, the term's boundaries fuse into any and all conflicts involving the military regime between 1974 and 1991. Any descriptive and analytical precision and value of the term is thereby lost.

In fact, the category of Red Terror has been a contested one since its first use in the Ethiopian context, although its connotations have since been inverted. Initially, the term was used to describe revolutionary legitimacy. A travelling concept adopted from other socialist revolutions, Red Terror was Marxist violence. It was justified by the necessities of a revolutionary situation and opposed to reactionary White Terror. Over time, however, the term has come to connote a critique of excessive state violence. The meaning of the colour adjective - 'red' - underwent a parallel transformation, being now often associated with bloodshed rather than with Marxism. In revolutionary Ethiopia there was no such ambiguity. As Professor Shiferaw Bekele recalled,<sup>3</sup> from late 1976 even the EPRP claimed Red Terror as the appropriate designation for its own,

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3. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 9 September 2011.

supposedly revolutionary, legitimate and hence 'red' assassination campaign. One former EPRP member remembers that

"during that time, we called the Derg's terror 'White Terror'. Because it was a fascist terror. If we used colour, we were waging 'Red Terror'."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed the concept of Terror itself, with all the connotations and pedigree it acquired in the "classical" revolutions, was introduced into Ethiopia by the EPRP, which was the first to use the Amharic term for Terror - *Shibir* - publicly in its organ, *Democrasia*.<sup>5</sup>

The most infamous Terror campaigns, however, were run by the state apparatus, and usage has since fixed the contested relation between signifier and signified. Red Terror is now ubiquitously associated with the Derg's state violence, White Terror with the EPRP's assassination campaign. Yet it must not be forgotten that these designations for periods or campaigns of violence are value-laden, each term implying a different moral and historical judgment.<sup>6</sup> Each term sheds a distinct light on an historical reality in what Mamdani has described as "the politics of naming",<sup>7</sup> and risks misrepresenting it. Continued designation of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence as Red Terror, in conjunction with a near-exclusive focus on state violence, has thus led to representations of the period as one of unilateral state terror. Similarly, the habitual reference to a singular Terror risks painting a misleading picture of a coherent system

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4. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

5. *Democrasia*, vol.4, no.11 (Nehase 26 1968 E.C. [1 September 1976]).

6. Cf. Antonius Robben, 'The assault on basic trust: disappearance, protest and reburial in Argentina', in Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (eds.), *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000), 70.

7. Mahmoud Mamdani, 'The politics of naming: genocide, civil war, insurgency', in *London Review of Books*, vol.29, no.5 (2007).

rather than of a web of manifold forms and agencies of violence.<sup>8</sup> Terms like 'civil war', highlighting the ambiguity and the multiple actors of the period,<sup>9</sup> or 'dirty war', emphasising its blurring of the distinction between combatants and civilians,<sup>10</sup> have regrettably been rarely applied to Ethiopia's urban revolutionary conflicts.

This thesis, then, is not merely concerned with the Ethiopian Red Terror, understood in its technical meaning as the official Red Terror campaign launched by the Derg in December 1977. Nor is it concerned merely with any one singular Terror campaign, state-sponsored or otherwise. Rather, the focus is on the social and political history of the violence that gripped the Ethiopian capital between 1976 and 1978, embracing diverse and conflicting sets of violent actions, of perpetrators and of victims. Revolutionary campaigns of violence, such as the EPRP's assassination campaign, the regime-induced campaign of *Netsa Ermeja* and the officially declared Red Terror are examined closely.

Equally under examination are the narratives and resources provided by these campaigns and often privatised, localised and socialised into alternative conflicts. As in a civil war, the political was brought into and transformed private and local domains even as these domains defined and altered the political. As in a dirty war, political contests were played out in the domains of everyday life: in private citizens' living rooms, in cafés, on the streets and in churches. The result is that political violence

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8. Cf. Keith M. Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture: vol.4: The Terror* (Pergamon Press: Oxford, 1987), xvi.

9. While there are difficulties with the application of the term 'civil war' to urban guerrilla struggles such as the Ethiopian Terror, common definitions suggest applicability. See for example Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: the Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006), 16.

10. Mark Mazower, 'Violence and the state in the twentieth century', in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no.4 (2002), 1177.

constitutes a category whose edges blur into every sphere of social life. Hence, a social history of the Terror years is called for.

### **Counting the victims**

The profound effects of the Terror years on Ethiopian state, society and public life remain apparent to this day. As we shall see, the Terror played a central role in the generation of one of the largest African diasporas; it defined the mode of state-society relations in the subsequent decade in socialist Ethiopia and continues to influence them to this day; and it inadvertently gave a tremendous boost to ethno-nationalist rural insurgencies, influencing the political order of post-Derg Ethiopia.

Above all, however, it cost the lives of the thousands of young Ethiopians who died in the urban violence. The exact number of victims is notoriously hard to determine and has been the subject of vastly varying estimates. Difficulties stemming from the decentralised nature of the killing are compounded by a common neglect of careful definitions of the Terror, and occasionally even of a differentiation between victims who were killed, tortured or detained.<sup>11</sup> Precise numbers will always remain elusive. As a survey by the US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services correctly concluded, "it is impossible to calculate the exact number of those killed, imprisoned or forced to flee the country [in the Terror]".<sup>12</sup>

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11. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror: contexts and consequences', in Kjetil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer and Girmachew Anemu (eds.), *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged* (James Currey: Oxford, 2009), 30.

12. US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Ethiopia: Background Information on the Mengistu Regime during the Red Terror*, 28 December 1999; cited in Gedion Wolde Amanuel, *The Day of the Martyrs* (Banawe Printing Press: Addis Ababa, 2010), 5.

Some estimates, however, are more credible than others. Mengistu Haile Mariam's own suggestion that no more than 2000 were killed in the Terror is easily dismissed,<sup>13</sup> as the Special Prosecutor's Office investigating Derg violence in the 1990s was able to name and document a significantly greater number of victims.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, government radio broadcasts in Addis Ababa announced the killing of almost 3000 "enemies of the regime" between February 1977 and May 1978 alone, most of them extra-judicial,<sup>15</sup> thus already topping the former chairman's estimate. At the other extreme, Babile Tola's "conservative" figure of 150.000<sup>16</sup> likewise lacks credibility. It is supported by no discernible evidence, and is of course inflated by the same political logic which stands behind Mengistu's impossibly low number.

Alex de Waal's observation that "more than 10.000 were murdered" in Addis Ababa alone represents a cautious but documentable estimate.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Kiflu Tadesse's figure of 55.000 killed in the capital, based on early figures from the EPRDF's investigating commission in 1991,<sup>18</sup> is a high estimate. Amnesty International deemed that between 30.000 and 50.000 Ethiopians were executed without formal charges or a trial in 1977, a significant part in Addis Ababa.<sup>19</sup> This figure needs to be augmented by

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13. Genet Ayele Anbesse, *የሌተናንት ኮሎኔል መንግሥቱ ሃይለ ማርያም ትዝታዎች* ['The memories of Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam'] (Kibru Publishers: Addis Ababa, 1994 E.C. [2001]), 32-3.

14. Interview, Special Prosecutor Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

15. As recorded by an attentive British expatriate. See Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 31/2257-25, Embassy Report on the Red Terror from Addis Ababa, 24 April 1978.

16. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation: The Red Terror in Ethiopia* (Free Ethiopia Press: Washington D.C., 1997), 160.

17. Alex de Waal, 'A permanent human rights memorial at the African Union headquarters' in ERTDRC, *Documenting the Red Terror: Bearing Witness to Ethiopia's Lost Generation* (ERTDRC: Ottawa, 2012), 156.

18. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part II: Ethiopia: Transformation and Conflict. The History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (University Press of America: Lanham, 1998), 269.

19. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice and reconciliation: the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Ethiopian High Court', in *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, vol.22, no.3 (1999), 678.

estimates of those killed in late 1976 and early 1978, but it provides a plausible spectrum for the number of victims of Ethiopia's urban violence. Brietzke concurs, concluding his early but thorough review by arguing that around 32.000 people died in the urban areas of Ethiopia in non-separatist violence.<sup>20</sup> Such precision is obtained at the cost of some speculation and much rounding; precise figures are bound to remain elusive and controversial.

Behind each number, however, meaningful histories of agency, of confrontation and of suffering lie concealed. Their totality may be hidden in the past, but each history that can be recovered and narrated sheds unique light on the period and its violence. Although it would be desirable to arrive at a more precise number of casualties, the histories and narratives that lie behind each incident of violence may be as revealing about the dynamics of the Terror as any concrete figure.

### **The historiography of the Terror**

The historiography on the Ethiopian Terror remains in its early stages. Publications with a primary focus on the period's revolutionary violence are scarce. A short overview by Bahru Zewde<sup>21</sup> provides a first periodisation and constitutes the least partisan introduction to the subject, but its length and scope limit it to this introductory function. A first book-length account of the Terror was published in 1989 by a leading EPRP

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20. Paul H. Brietzke, *Law, Development, and the Ethiopian Revolution* (Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, 1982), 196. How exactly the author calculated this precise figure is unclear.

21. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror'.

member under the pseudonym of 'Babile Tola'.<sup>22</sup> It not only lacks the scholarly rigour of Bahru's paper, but also openly approaches the period from the perspective of the EPRP and in its defense. In this, it is akin to the party histories that have recorded the development, experiences and actions of the dominant civilian parties involved in Ethiopia's revolutionary urban conflicts. Kiflu Tadesse's two-volume chronicle of the EPRP<sup>23</sup> and Andargachew Assegid's history of the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement<sup>24</sup> (*Meison*) are the definitive studies in this category.

Both of these former political leaders assume an apologetic tone when discussing their movements' role in organising and perpetrating violence. Nevertheless, their accounts provide valuable insights both into particulars of the period's history and into the development of narratives about it. Both party histories are best understood in conjunction with a number of unpublished dissertations and papers. Most notable among these is an MA dissertation by Tesfu Kefyalew on the organisational structure of the EPRP,<sup>25</sup> and an overview of Meison's rise and fall, based largely on a close reading of the party organ, *YeSafiw Hizb Demz* ['Voice of the Broad Masses'], by Wudu Tafete.<sup>26</sup>

The majority of studies which touch on the Terror years remain those that approach the period as an appendix to the revolution of 1974. This is in line with a surviving trend in Ethiopian historiography, which - in spite of noteworthy recent works aiming at

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22. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*.

23. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: the History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (University Press of America: Lanham, 1993) and Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part II*. The Amharic edition consists of three volumes.

24. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ: መኪሶን በኢትዮጵያ ሕዝቦች ትግል ውስጥ [A Long Journey Cut Short: Meison in the struggle of the Ethiopian people] (The Central Printing Press: Addis Ababa, 1993 E.C. [2000]).

25. Tesfu Kefyalew, 'The organisational structure of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (c.1972-1978) and its debacle', MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University (2009).

26. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison: from opposition to critical support, and its suppression as the 'right-roader', 1974-77', Unpublished Manuscript (1994 E.C. [2001]).

rectification<sup>27</sup> - leans towards histories of the central state. The tendency remains to major on supposedly great and state-building themes, often at the expense of other subjects of deep significance in understanding Ethiopia's political and social history.<sup>28</sup> Thus the rise of Tewodros, resuscitating or reinventing the Ethiopian state in the 1850s, is emphasised over the preceding chaos and lack of a central state during the *Zemene Mesafint*, when regional lords controlled a weak and marginalised monarchy; the battle of Adwa, long a corner stone of national identity, continues to attract more attention than the ambiguous period of the Italian occupation; and, critically for this study, the at times celebrated and much discussed revolution of 1974 is privileged over the Terror that followed so closely on its heels. Such prioritisation of the revolution inevitably introduces and imposes a set of interests, biases and common concerns into the literature. Not least among these is a near-exclusive focus on the macro-political level, which has contributed to a reductionistic link of causality in accounting for the period's violence.

In spite of common tendencies and approaches, however, significant variety exists within the literature on the Ethiopian Terror. The spectrum stretches from the agitating political paper seeking to influence the course of the revolution,<sup>29</sup> over early and often sympathetic analyses by outsiders,<sup>30</sup> to a range of studies published when the Derg's gradual demise raised urgent questions concerning the future shape and even existence

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27. See especially Wendy James and Donald Donham (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986).

28. Christopher Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', in *Annales d'Ethiopie*, vol.18, (2002), 40.

29. Nega Ayele and John Markakis, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Spokesman: Nottingham, 1978).

30. See especially David and Marina Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (Africana: New York, 1978); Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (Verso: London, 1981); René Lefort, *Ethiopia: an heretical revolution?* (Zed: London, 1983 [Paris, 1981]).

of an Ethiopian political entity.<sup>31</sup> Several histories of the revolution were added to this literature after the demise of the Derg. Among these, Andargachew Tiruneh's study,<sup>32</sup> which contains an informative narrative outline of the Terror's political history but little analysis, is particularly noteworthy, as is Messay Kebede's recent and more analytical volume.<sup>33</sup>

The strengths of these publications are largely those of traditional political historiography: detailed narratives of major political events; chronologies linking these events and beginning to develop periodisations; and attentive analyses of the background, rise and motives of leading figures and institutions. Their weaknesses, however, are manifold: there is an abundance of descriptive accounts, containing little historical analysis. Equally, there is no shortage of position papers, intent on justifying or condemning a given perspective, action or group.<sup>34</sup> The density of political histories of events and of 'big men' has been to the detriment of other types of history. And the marked tendency has been to either follow one of the competing politicised narratives of the Terror years or to attempt to harmonise them, thereby ignoring the significant histories and experiences embodied in alternative narratives. A study of the Terror years that draws on different voices, different perspectives and different forms of historical research is yet to be written.

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31. See especially Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988); John Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation: the quest for the post-imperial state* (Westview Press: Boulder, 1988); Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: from Empire to People's Republic* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1988).

32. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*.

33. Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2011).

34. Abiy Ford, 'Foreword' in Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students: their struggle to articulate the Ethiopian Revolution* (N. Type: Chicago, 1990).

To some extent these weaknesses in the literature are mitigated by a burgeoning body of memoirs set against the backdrop of the Terror. These recollections have greatly increased in number and variety over the past few years, indicating that many participants have attained the critical distance to the period's traumatic events necessary to publicly recall their experiences.<sup>35</sup> Immensely informative and often insightful in their own right, these writings also begin to address the lack of a multivocal history of the Terror years in the scholarly historiography. Rich in variegated perspectives and in portrayals of the role the Terror played in highly diverse life histories, this literature furthermore offers academic studies new instruments and avenues for further research.

Yet despite such new resources, much research remains to be done if the academic historiography of the Terror years is to reflect the incisive importance of the period in the history of modern Ethiopia. The following four gaps in the historiography remain particularly glaring.

Firstly, the Ethiopian experience remains surprisingly isolated from wider research into the causes, meanings and effects of collective violence. Several scholars have drawn comparisons between the "classical" revolutions of France and Russia and the Ethiopian case, and raised questions about the extent to which the revolution of 1974 and its violent aftermath have followed the pattern of those much-studied predecessors.<sup>36</sup> They have rightly highlighted parallels between these revolutions, as

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35. See for example Chanyalew Kassa, **ከደመላሽ የመቃብር አፋፍ** ['On the Edge of Demelash's Grave'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]); Eshetu Wendemu Wolde Selassie, **ሕይወት በመንግስቱ ቤተ መንግስት** ['Life in the Palace of Mengistu'] (Artot: Addis Ababa, 2002 E.C. [2010]); Girmay Aberha, **የጊያነቡ አግሮች** ['Bleeding Feet'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 2002 E.C. [2010]); Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa University Press: Addis Ababa, 2012); Konjit Berhan, **ምርኮኛ** ['Captive'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2010]); Taklo Teshome, **የደም ዘመን** ['The age of blood'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2011]).

36. Gebru Tareke, 'The Red Terror in Ethiopia: an historical aberration', in *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol.24, no.2 (2008); Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 17-18.

well as dynamics that were unique to Ethiopia, such as the primacy of violence *among* revolutionaries and the rapidity with which revolutionary values and language were embraced. There is, however, a danger in such comparisons of de-historicising revolutions by treating them primarily as analogies.<sup>37</sup>

Comparisons with other revolutions also fall a long way short of inserting the Ethiopian experience into the much wider, more nuanced and more recent discussions concerning the nature and logic of collective violence. Edward Kissi's discussion of mass violence by the regimes of Ethiopia and Cambodia<sup>38</sup> in the late 1970s aside, both the comparative record and theoretical discussions on collective violence are largely ignored in the scholarship on the Ethiopian Terror. This is not only regrettable because it forestalls the application of insights, methods and theories of research developed within this wider literature to the study of the Terror. It also means that the Ethiopian experience remains widely unknown and unheard in a scholarly context to which it has much to contribute. The result is an undesirable reinforcement of lingering notions of an Ethiopian exceptionalism. This study seeks to bridge this gap and to counter such notions of exceptionalism by beginning to insert the Ethiopian Terror into this comparative and theoretical literature.

A second malaise in the historiography concerns its focus on events and on major political actors and institutions. This has left many of the social dynamics underpinning and closely interrelating with the violence of the Terror entirely unexplored. The interrelations between the everyday realities of urban life - religion, music and the arts, street life, crime, fashion, local bonds and rivalries - and the political sphere are

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37. Michel Vovelle, '1789-1917: The game of analogies' in Baker, *The French Revolution*, passim.

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

transparently vivid in the memories of witnesses, but have received scarce attention in the existing literature. By embedding political history in the broader realities of Addis Ababa's social history, this thesis begins to address this omission.

A third historiographical gap needs to be highlighted: voices which are not deemed central to the political narrative find no hearing or echo in the historiography. One facet of this silence is the astounding scarcity of female voices in the literature. This includes, remarkably, the voices of women who played a prominent role in the struggles of the time. Apart from a few memoirs,<sup>39</sup> women play a far more marginal role in the historiography of the Terror than they did in its actual unfolding. This thesis attempts to counter this perspectival monotony by drawing on the life histories and experiences of a greater range of actors and participants, thereby introducing a new polyphony into the literature.

Finally, it is evident that much research is yet to be conducted on the legacies of the Terror. While significant consequences of the period have been stated in the literature, these have been asserted rather than examined in adequate detail.<sup>40</sup> By examining how the years of Terror changed the institutions of the state and the relations of society, from the establishment of powerful local administrations to the erosion of social trust, this study will begin to address this historiographical gap.

In contrast to the dominant thrust of the literature, then, this study is not primarily a history of the Ethiopian state, although that state certainly plays a prominent role in it.

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39. See for example the remarkable autobiography of a female EPRP activist, written shortly before she was killed at the party's guerrilla base at Assimba and published to little acclaim almost two decades later: Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror: a fighting woman's tale* (Unknown: Washington D.C., 1997).

40. A notable exception is the study of the Ethiopian Diaspora in America and the role of the Terror in its generation by Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants and Refugees in America, 1900-2000: Patterns of Migration, Survival and Adjustment* (LFP Scholarly Publishing: New York, 2007).

Rather, it is a history of violence. Its focus is on the reasons, the dynamics, the effects and the memories of collective violence in the Ethiopian Terror.

### **Making sense of collective violence**

Many approaches to understanding human violence in general, and collective violence in particular, have been advanced. Here, we shall only engage some of the most productive in making sense of the Ethiopian Terror, all of which are applied, engaged or developed in subsequent chapters. The task is a difficult one: as Bahru Zewde has argued, "the causal explanation of terror is one of the greatest challenges that a historian faces."<sup>41</sup> The complex and variegated nature of the origins, dynamics and ramifications of collective violence means that no single approach, indeed no single discipline, can comprehensively address the questions such violence raises. Targeting "the body, the psyche, as well as the socio-cultural order," collective violence "cannot be reduced to a single level of analysis."<sup>42</sup> Historical research examining periods of collective violence thus needs to draw on and converse with inter-disciplinary discussions. Recognising the inseparability of causative layers and of motives, multiple approaches and theoretical frameworks need to be adopted in order to reduce the common reductionism of monocausal explanations and of artificial analytical categories.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 19; cf. Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton Paperbacks: Princeton, 2000), 17.

42. Robben et al., *Cultures under Siege*, 1.

43. Christopher Cramer, *Civil War is not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries* (Hurst: London, 2006), 3-5.

Abbink has argued that the Ethiopian Terror constituted a distinctly modern phenomenon; the period's violence, he argues, hence needs to be understood and analysed in the context of other instances of mass violence involving modern states in the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> This argument is particularly apt in the latter stages of the conflict, when open contestation turned into state terror as the accoutrements of the modern state were exploited to bureaucratise, institutionalise and monopolise violence. The twentieth century has famously been described by Camus as one of large-scale and premeditated collective violence;<sup>45</sup> aspects of his description were to be painfully born out in revolutionary Ethiopia, such as the instrumentalisation of ideologies of modernity by regimes for any use, including to turn murderers into judges.

But although the modern state played a central role in the generation and form of Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence, understandings of that violence need to be rooted first in the particular history of modern Ethiopia rather than in generalised models of the modern state. This is due to the fact that the Ethiopian terror campaigns were simultaneously distinctly modern and highly local phenomena. They correlated, as Hinton has observed in another context,<sup>46</sup> with modernities on the ground rather than with an abstract modernity. This study examines the interrelations between a contested modernity on the ground, the development of Ethiopia's modern state and the forms and dynamics of violence in the Terror. In so doing, it seeks to insert Ethiopia's revolutionary violence into wider discussions about state violence in modern Africa.

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44. Jon Abbink, 'Transformations of violence in twentieth century Ethiopia: cultural roots, political conjunctures', in *Focaal: tijdschrift voor antropologie*, vol.25 (1995), 57.

45. Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté* (Gallimard: Paris, 1951).

46. Alexander L. Hinton (ed.), *Annihilating Difference: the Anthropology of Genocide* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2002), 18. For similar observations in the context of the Rwandan Genocide, see Christopher Taylor, 'The cultural face of terror in the Rwandan genocide of 1994' in Hinton, *Annihilating Difference*, 139.

Since the early 1990s, the historiography of violence on the African continent has grown significantly. Accounts and analyses of histories of violence have again come to occupy a central place in the historiography of Africa. Yet despite its new breadth, the historiography of violence in Africa is of uneven depth. A number of conflicts have attracted intensive and sustained investigation by historians, while others have received but scant attention.

This asymmetry maps onto a number of variables, not least the ease of access to sources; the amount of interest and response a given conflict has aroused internationally; and a conflict's overlap with other dominant or fashionable research agendas. Significant bodies of literature, ripe with divergent perspectives and nuanced debates, have thus developed around some cases of violent conflict, such as the civil wars in Algeria and Kenya which hastened the end of the French and British empires in Africa, or the lengthy and multilayered struggles against Apartheid in South Africa. Other conflicts, such as the protracted civil war in Acholiland in northern Uganda,<sup>47</sup> are only beginning to receive due attention. In this comparative context, Ethiopia's Terror years belong in the latter category. The maturing historiography of the Ethiopian Terror is hence yet to take its place in this wider historiography of violence in Africa, and indeed beyond that in comparative and theoretical discussions about the reasons, dynamics and effects of collective violence.

This study engages these discussions along three lines. Firstly, it draws on and applies emerging theories about the logic of violence in civil wars, which protest against explanations based solely on conflicting group identities. Instead, they advance

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47. Cf. Sverker Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings: war, history and everyday moments in northern Uganda* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2008).

an approach rooted in a closer examination of local dynamics and of the complex connections between a conflict's micro-level and its supposed master-cleavage. Secondly, this study proposes a Girardian approach to understanding the relations between social order, the revolutionary situation and the reign of terror. Finally, this study inquires into the nexus that links organisational structures and the shaping of perpetrators and acts of violence. It draws on important insights gained by recent studies conducted in South America, which have hitherto received limited attention in African contexts. In the following, we shall briefly survey these lines of argument, each of which is further developed and contextualised in subsequent chapters.

***(i) Endogenous conflict dynamics***

Our first line of argument concerns alternative approaches to making sense of the dynamics of collective violence, particularly in the context of civil wars and state terror. In historical studies of conflicts in Africa, a dominant approach to accounting for violence remains an inquiry into pre-existing cleavages and into processes of their accentuation and radicalisation. In their simpler form, such approaches have understood violence as the result of antagonisms between collective identities, frequently ethnic. For example, the Rwandan genocide has been portrayed as the outcome of prolonged hostility between Hutus and Tutsis;<sup>48</sup> the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya has been cast as a conflict between nationalists on the one hand and colonial officers aided by African

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48. See the discussion in Peter Uvin, 'Ethnicity and power in Burundi and Rwanda: different paths to mass violence', in *Comparative Politics*, vol.31, no.3 (1999), 253.

loyalists on the other;<sup>49</sup> and the Italian occupation of Ethiopia has been represented as a mere conflict between "patriots" and colonial invaders aided by unpatriotic *banda* collaborators.<sup>50</sup> Media accounts reporting on African conflicts consistently point to such pre-existing cleavages to account for outbreaks of violence.

Following this approach, the conflicts of the Ethiopian Terror years have variously been reduced to antagonisms between the EPRP and Meison, or alternatively between the civilian opposition and the military regime. Yet the facile recourse to collective identities as the drivers of conflict doesn't do justice to the complexities of any conflict. Reality invariably refuses to be conformed to the two-dimensional moulds of theory. Returning to the same set of examples, the Rwandan genocide targeted moderate Hutus along with Tutsis and was driven as much by fear and intra-ethnic intimidation as by antagonism between ethnic groups;<sup>51</sup> during the Mau Mau insurgency, 'loyalist' and 'insurgent' were often fluid categories, and loyalists were no less nationalist for their opposition to Mau Mau;<sup>52</sup> and in Italian-occupied Ethiopia, patriots and collaborators were often the same actors in different settings. As this study will show, reductionistic appeals to a master cleavage also do little to explain the realities of revolutionary Terror in Ethiopia. Such rigidly conceived collective identities provide no key to understanding the fluid ambiguities of civil conflicts.

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49. Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (Jonathan Cape: New York, 2005).

50. See for example Angelo Del Boca, *The Ethiopian War: 1935-1941* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1969); Alberto Sbacchi, *Il Colonialismo Italiano in Etiopia, 1936-1941* (Ugo Mursia: Milano, 1980).

51. Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2006).

52. Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonization* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009); David M. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (W.W. Norton: London, 2005).

More nuanced analyses following the collective identities approach have sought to avoid the danger of essentialising identities and of undermining sub-group agency. Their focus has been on the way particular identities have been manipulated and instrumentalised in order to incite collective violence.<sup>53</sup> In the context of the Rwandan Genocide, for instance, such analyses have emphasised the historical construction of Hutu and Tutsi identities,<sup>54</sup> the radicalisation of Hutu identity in the months preceding the genocide<sup>55</sup> and the political agendas for which this kindling of ethnic sentiment was pursued.<sup>56</sup> Such analyses still seek to explain mass violence by referring to collective identities, but emphasise their socio-political construction and instrumentalisation. Collective violence, they contend, is best understood as the result of identity cleavages often constructed or radicalised in the build-up to conflict. Their more nuanced understanding of the construction, politics and instrumentalisation of identity enables these analyses to avoid many of the pitfalls that mar the less sophisticated versions of the same approach, and several such analyses have made important contributions to our understanding of the onset and dynamics of collective violence.

Yet influential recent studies have questioned whether approaches based on cleavages between collective identities suffice as explanations for more than initial outbreaks of violence.<sup>57</sup> These studies contend that such approaches fail to pay adequate

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53. Amartya Sen, 'Violence, identity and poverty', in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.45, no.2 (2008), 7.

54. Mahmoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2001).

55. Frank Chalk, 'Hate radio in Rwanda' in Howard Adelman and Astri Suhrke (eds.), *The Path of a Genocide: The Rwanda Crisis from Uganda to Zaire* (Africa Book Centre: London, 1999); for a more critical analysis, see Scott Straus, 'What is the relationship between hate radio and violence? Rethinking Rwanda's "Radio Machete"', in *Politics & Society*, vol.35, no.4 (2007).

56. Gérard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Hurst: London, 1998).

57. See for instance Kalyvas, 'The ontology'; Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2006); Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*.

attention to the the profound ambiguity that characterises civil wars and to the power of violence itself in creating and feeding cleavages during violent conflicts. The concept of group conflict invariably reduces the complexities of civil conflicts and presupposes the problematic notion of the interchangeability of individuals. The causes and the dynamics of collective violence, the authors of these studies contend, need to be more firmly distinguished in historiographies of conflict. They warn against an overestimation of "the power of the past in determining allegiances during conflict",<sup>58</sup> noting instead that behaviour and identity are shaped as much by the endogenous dynamics of violence as by a conflict's pre-history.<sup>59</sup> Divisions between actors are commonly the product as much as the catalyst of conflict.

Instead of seeking to explain the dynamics of collective violence with reference to pre-existing cleavages and processes of their accentuation, then, a new approach to understanding collective violence emerges. This approach identifies two interrelated but distinct vectors of endogenous dynamics, which together shape the forms and course of a conflict's violence: on the one hand, experiences of violence affect participant perceptions and identities and become themselves a significant driver of collective violence. On the other hand, patterns of territorial and social control by parties to the conflict have a profound effect on the occurrence and dynamics of collective violence at the local level.

Both vectors of endogenous conflict dynamics were vividly borne out during Ethiopia's Terror years. The conflict's supposed master cleavages had their origins in the Ethiopian Student Movement, in the history of the armed forces and in the early

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58. Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*, 223.

59. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 46-47.

revolutionary situation, but the main factor militarising this cleavage was the exercise and experience of violence itself. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that members of opposing groups, whose narratives remember the violence of the Terror years in markedly different ways, concur in locating its origins in experiences of violence, pointing either to the EPRP's assassination campaign or to the government's violent repression as the cause of the Terror. Just as many Acholi decided to support LRA rebels following violent excesses by the Ugandan Army in the late 1980s;<sup>60</sup> as Mau Mau atrocities at Lari provided a turning point in the Kenyan emergency by greatly strengthening the loyalist cause;<sup>61</sup> or as thousands of youths left Asmara to join the EPLF after gross abuses by Ethiopian troops in 1978;<sup>62</sup> so also in the urban Ethiopian Terror the experience of violence polarised and redefined identities like perhaps no other single factor.

Yet the exercise and experience of violence not only solidified existing identities, it also generated new alliances and divisions. Both the Derg and the EPRP divided over questions concerning the appropriate exercise of violence. In both cases, radical positions were advocated, accepted and adopted in large part due to perceptions of an existing atrocity environment. Within the Derg, the radical wing led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam was confronted by a more moderate faction surrounding Lieutenant Alemayehu Hailu and Captain Moges Haile Mikael. The strengthening of the latter group in December 1976 and January 1977 triggered a pre-emptive internal coup d'état by Mengistu Haile Mariam. A parallel split occurred within the EPRP when

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60. Finnström, *Living with bad surroundings*.

61. Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, 139-151.

62. Mary Dines, 'The Red Terror', in Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe and Bereket Habte Selassie (eds.), *Behind the War in Eritrea* (Spokesman: Nottingham, 1980).

a sizeable group of supporters, led by prominent members Berhane Meskel Redda and Getatchew Maru, protested against the use of assassinations as a political instrument. Pejoratively labeled *Anja* ['Faction'], the group soon became the target of those very assassinations alongside Meison militants. In both cases, the experience of violence - and hence a factor endogenous to the conflict - constituted a major determinant of conflict dynamics.

This is not, of course, to deny the importance of processes of identity formation, radicalisation and 'othering' in the build-up to collective violence. The Rwandan government's efforts to radicalise ethnic identities in the months preceding the 1994 genocide forbid such a conclusion. So does the "newspaper war" that prepared the way for the Zanzibari revolution, a "campaign to convince Zanzibaris that their interests and political identities should be defined by descent".<sup>63</sup> The resultant solidification of the identity paradigms of the Swahili coast, otherwise celebrated for their assimilative and liberal nature,<sup>64</sup> provided the seedbed for the violence of the Zanzibari revolution. Indeed, we shall see that political identities did undergo a process of radicalisation in the build-up to the Ethiopian Terror, too. The point here is not to minimise the importance of a conflict's pre-history in processes of identity-formation. Rather, it is to emphasise that conflict identities are uniquely redefined and polarised through a conflict's endogenous dynamics, particularly the experience of its violence.

A second factor endogenous to conflicts that has a profound effect on the occurrence, form and trajectory of collective violence consists in shifting patterns of

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63. Jonathan Glassman, 'Sorting out the tribes: the creation of racial identities in colonial Zanzibar's newspaper wars', in *The Journal of African History*, vol.41, no.3 (2000), 395.

64. Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Sharif, *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* (Africa World Press: Trenton, 1994), passim.

territorial and social control. In his seminal analysis concerning the logic of violence in civil wars, Stathis Kalyvas has demonstrated how the extent of control by one conflicting party correlates with the degree and nature of violence on the ground.<sup>65</sup> Territorial and social control enable a group to credibly incentivise collaboration, to give sanction to defectors and to penalise noncompliance, thereby encouraging cooperation by the local population almost regardless of its genuine preference. Where control is uncontested, violence is seldom needed to elicit cooperation. In contested areas, on the other hand, violence represents an important instrument to shape collaboration and deter defection. Only selective violence, Kalyvas argues, can function efficiently as such an instrument, since indiscriminate violence offers no protection to collaborators or disincentive to defectors, and is thus inefficient.<sup>66</sup> Selective violence, however, is dependent on the provision of information by individuals. This is most forthcoming when the risk for counterdenunciation is minimal and the protection afforded by the political group receiving the information is credible. Such a situation tends to occur when one group is almost hegemonic, but its control is still being sufficiently challenged to warrant a violent response. Neither the controlled nor the evenly contested area, Kalyvas predicts, is therefore most likely to experience extensive violence, but rather that area over which one group has established significant but fragile control. "Violence, in other words, is most likely where the organizational demand for information meets its individual supply."<sup>67</sup>

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65. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, ch.5.

66. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, ch.6.

67. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 13.

Ethiopia's urban conflict during the years of Terror corroborates Kalyvas' prediction. The violence of the Terror reached its climax in the second half of 1977 and in early 1978, when the Derg's control over Addis Ababa was near hegemonic but still contested. The Derg's tightening grip over Addis Ababa and the concomitant weakening of the civilian opposition initially led to an increase rather than a subsiding of violence at the local level. Similarly, violence was most intense in neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa where the EPRP had enjoyed a strong following, such as Mercato and Gulele. In these neighbourhoods, too, it reached its peak when the regime's control was strengthening and the opposition faltered. The Terror's violence only abated when the Derg succeeded in establishing hegemonic control over the capital.

A number of implications follow from the applicability of this approach to making sense of the Terror's violence. Firstly, the collective violence of the Terror needs to be recognised as aggregate violence, produced by supralocal and local actors in synergistic but often distinguishable ways. Local and supralocal actors depended on each other's resources to generate this violence, which therefore needs to be understood as much in its local dimensions as in its linkages to the political centre. The Terror was not a binary conflict, but rather the result of a confluence of local and supra-local motives, decisions and actions. Its violence aggregates these multiple sources and actors, but it continues to reflect their alternative goals.<sup>68</sup> This interaction between local agents, agendas and associations and 'central' political ones, such as the Derg's security apparatus, needs to be appreciated if the violence of the Terror is to be understood.

Secondly, the category of 'political violence' needs to be interrogated and problematised. The historiography of the Ethiopian Terror persists in understanding the

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68. Cf. Kalyvas, 'The ontology', 475.

period's violence in merely political terms. Yet the role of endogenous conflict dynamics in shaping that violence, combined with a recognition of its aggregate character, suggest that this is reductionistic. Uncovering the social and local underpinnings of the Terror's ostensibly macro-political collective violence constitutes an urgent task of this study.

Finally, the adoption of an approach which pays close attention to the Terror's dynamics on the ground inevitably entails a high regard for microhistory. Only at the local level can the complexities of violence that often remain hidden behind seemingly definite categories be unveiled. To understand the aggregate production of collective violence, study of the macro-dynamics of the political centre needs to be augmented by research into the micro-dynamics of social ties in neighbourhoods and households.

The scarcity of studies examining the urban local in the historiography of modern Ethiopia may account for the persistent tendency to analyse revolutionary violence merely in macro-political categories. Social and local histories of Ethiopia have tended to be situated in the rural 'periphery',<sup>69</sup> while even advocates of microhistorical approaches have reverted to conventional political history when approaching the urban 'centre' that is so closely intertwined with the politics and presence of the state.<sup>70</sup> In order to understand the local dynamics of violence in the Ethiopian Terror, this thesis therefore triangulates an approach to the period 'from below' with macro-political and international perspectives.

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69. See especially James and Donham, *The Southern Marches*, and Wendy James, Donald Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi (eds.), *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After* (James Currey: Oxford, 2002).

70. See for example Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1999).

An examination of the Terror's local history has much to contribute to the emerging historiography of the Ethiopian revolution. Not least, it is a necessary task if the relational and communicative dimension of collective violence are to be understood. All violence, as is commonly observed, is "replete with meanings for both victims and victimizers".<sup>71</sup> These meanings are commonly highly local in character, and thus missed in studies that seek to explain all violence merely with reference to a conflict's master cleavage. As Hinton rightly observed, "violence is always enacted in a vernacular", and therefore "almost always makes some sort of local sense."<sup>72</sup> Its analysis hence requires a focus on the local level. Closely related is Charles Tilly's observation that since violence is always communicative and relational, an understanding of violence requires the analysis of its social contexts and functions.<sup>73</sup> Such analysis is dependent on contextualised local histories, mapping social networks and relationships on the ground. Certain dynamics of violence, and its continuum over time,<sup>74</sup> are only recognisable with a microhistorical approach. A closer examination of the violence of the Ethiopian Terror, then, requires multiple lenses and foci. Analyses of state and party politics must be supplemented by approaches that investigate the local dimensions of the period's aggregate violence.

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71. Neil Whitehead (ed.), *Violence* (School of American Research Press: Oxford, 2004), 9.

72. Alexander Laban Hinton, 'The poetics of genocidal practice: violence under the Khmer Rouge' in Whitehead, *Violence*, 159, 182.

73. Charles Tilly, 'Introduction: violence viewed and reviewed', in *Social Research*, vol.67, no.3 (2000), 1-3.

74. Cf. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2004), *passim*.

*(ii) Collective violence and social order*

Our second line of argument concerns the connections between social order, revolutionary situations and the emergence of collective violence. A close correlation between social revolutions<sup>75</sup> and reigns of terror is well documented in the historiography of revolutions. Indeed, O'Kane has persuasively argued that the only revolutions to have escaped a subsequent outbreak of collective violence were those that emerged as a result of civil war, and were hence themselves products of collective violence.<sup>76</sup> A nexus of social revolutions and collective violence is thus apparent. The processes which link these phenomena, however, have received little attention.

In the historiography of modern Ethiopia, the Terror's roots in the revolutionary situation are often stated but rarely analysed. This study argues that two particular traits of Ethiopia's revolutionary situation played an important part in the emergence of the Terror: on the one hand, the gradual demise of the imperial system undermined the transcendent claims to legitimacy of the state and with it the distinction between illegitimate criminal violence and legitimate responsive state violence. As a result, the state lost its ability to constrain without having its own essential violence unmasked. On the other hand, the newly incumbent military regime needed to re-establish this distinction between types of violence: such violence as is perceived to break down social order and violence which is perceived to maintain it. Furthermore, the Derg needed to ensure that its own violence was identified with the latter category. When all

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75. Following the distinction between social and 'merely' political revolutions laid out in Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts*.

76. Rosemary O'Kane, *The Revolutionary Reign of Terror: The Role of Violence in Political Change* (Edward Elgar Publishing: Brookfield, 1991), 6-7.

other resources proved insufficient to institute this distinction and to construct legitimacy, violence itself became the only remaining instrument of social engineering. Thus not merely power, but also a sense of legitimacy and a distinction between types of violence grew out of the barrel of the gun during the Terror years.

These findings are congruent with a Girardian approach to the relations between the demise of social order and the emergence of collective violence, as developed for instance by Colin Lucas in his analysis of the French revolution.<sup>77</sup> In the following, this approach to understanding the emergence of the Ethiopian Terror is briefly surveyed.

René Girard's literary output has been significant and his influence has been felt across diverse disciplines. Consequently, his name is in many disciplines readily associated with particular aspects of his work, most notably his mimetic theory, his description of the scapegoating mechanism or his insights into the interrelations between collective violence and sacrificial systems.<sup>78</sup> Here we shall merely be concerned with one particular aspect of his work, namely his understanding of how collective violence emerges and spreads in the wake of significant socio-cultural turmoil. Girard argues that latent violence, which indelibly threatens social dissolution,<sup>79</sup> is in modern states restrained by governments' monopoly on retributive violence. This arrangement parallels and often replaces the traditional function of sacrificial systems and of elaborate social rules governing vendetta. However, since government retribution resembles blood-crime in its use of violence and may thus threaten the social order in much the same way as the original crime, it is necessary for

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77. Colin Lucas, 'Revolutionary violence, the people and the terror' in Baker, *The French Revolution*.

78. For a brief overview of Girard's work, see James G. Williams (ed.), *The Girard Reader* (Crossroad Publishing: New York, 1996).

79. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 57.

society "to distinguish firmly between the two types of violence: crime and punishment. Above all, it becomes necessary to mask the violence of the remedy to violence."<sup>80</sup> A social order, upheld by legitimising myths and accepted power relations, exists when a society readily distinguishes between order-destroying and order-restoring violence, or, in other words, between illegitimate and legitimate violence.<sup>81</sup> The violence of the state<sup>82</sup> is thus effectively either masked or justified.

Such social order dissolves when the system loses its transcendent quality and consequently its ability to constrain alternative sources of violence without disclosing its own, analogous, violence. In this case "the line between legitimate and illegitimate violence becomes simply a matter of opinion, upon which individuals and groups are free to diverge."<sup>83</sup> Collective violence, usually in the form of civil war, ensues.

The revolutionary process had precisely this effect on urban Ethiopia's social order. Like other cases of collective violence, the Ethiopian Terror years were preceded by "precipitous socio-cultural changes leading to an undermining of traditional values."<sup>84</sup> A significant but rarely appreciated effect of the revolutionary process was the dissolution of the distinction between illegitimate criminal violence and legitimate responsive violence, and therefore of the social order which rested upon this distinction. The revolution triggered a social crisis by desecrating one hegemonic social order without having yet established a new one. Violence could thus no longer be appeased and channeled into productive outlets to reinforce the social order, and instead became

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80. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 59.

81. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Crossroad Publishing: New York, 1995), 7.

82. Assuming, of course, that the state is the beneficiary of this distinction.

83. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 60.

84. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace*, 14.

privatised and decentralised. The urban conflicts that characterised the early stages of Ethiopia's Terror years fed on this disintegration of social order. As Girard observed, violence, "if left unappeased, [...] will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area."<sup>85</sup>

One application of this line of thought concerns the position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the *ancien régime*. It is commonly observed that the Orthodox Church played a central role in legitimising the violence of the imperial regime and in conceptually setting it apart from other forms of violence. But the impact that the undermining of the Orthodox Church's position by the revolutionary process had has scarcely received any attention. In the absence of alternative legitimising structures, the rejection of the Orthodox Church's political role along with the foundational myths of the imperial regime exacerbated the demise of a distinct category for state-controlled retributive violence, and thus of an essential check on the spread of violence.

Yet collective violence marks not only the demise of one social order, it also stands at the beginning of a new one. In this sense, "violence has the effect of a 'creative' or at least 'constituent' force in social relations: deconstructing, redefining or reshaping a social order, whether intended or not."<sup>86</sup> In its efforts to gain control over urban Ethiopia and to reinstate a stable social order, the Derg employed a number of strategies. They ranged from the instrumentalisation of socialist ideology over the scapegoating of alleged "counter-revolutionaries" to the use of state terror. All of these strategies are linked, of course, as the adoption of socialist ideology, bolstered by a

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85. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1977 [Paris, 1972]), 10.

86. Goran Aijmer and Jan Abbink (eds.), *Meanings of Violence* (Berg: Oxford, 2000), xii.

strong nationalist rhetoric, enabled the regime to define and to converge upon the 'scapegoats' and to justify the use of violence against them.

This drive to reimpose a social order by forcefully reinstating a distinction between crime and punishment, between criminal and state-sanctioned violence, defined the latter stages of the Ethiopian Terror, in which the nature of collective violence increasingly tilted from civil conflict towards unilateral state terror. Violence formed the foundation of socialist Ethiopia's social order. *Contra* Arendt,<sup>87</sup> a form of legitimate power, once lost, can indeed be regained through violence. These observations are consonant with Girard's theory that all social order originates in processes of collective violence and scapegoating.

Collective violence in the Ethiopian Terror was hence both the result of the disintegration of a social order and a means to the creation of a new one. Or, in the words of Bailie's apt generalisation,

"human history is the relentless chronicle of violence that it is because when cultures fall apart they fall into violence, and when they revive themselves they do so violently."<sup>88</sup>

### *(iii) The organisational structures of collective violence*

Our final line of argument engaging comparative and theoretical discussions about collective violence concerns the nexus between organisational structures, socio-psychological contexts of violence and the shaping of perpetrators. In the

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87. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt Publishers: New York, 1970), passim.

88. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 6.

historiography of the Ethiopian Terror years two divergent perspectives on perpetrators of collective violence coexist. On the one hand, the most extreme and notorious acts of torture and public execution during the Ethiopian Terror are commonly associated with infamous perpetrators like Girma Kebede or Kelbessa Negewo. Violence is hence ascribed to the supposedly deranged psychological make-up of such individuals. Felekech Metaferia provides a typical example when she writes that

"there are misfits, crazy and mad people in any society who commit unpredictable acts of extreme violence. The collapse of the feudal system, the socialist revolution, war and dislocation brought them all out in Ethiopia during these miserable years".<sup>89</sup>

This 'dispositional-individual explanation'<sup>90</sup> roots extreme acts of violence in individual psychology and pathology. The role of institutional and organisational structures in the production of collective violence is thus ignored or relegated to "bringing out" individuals already predisposed to committing violence.

On the other hand, the structure of the Derg's security apparatus has been so closely linked to the abuses of the state terror that Derg officers who had any form of organisational oversight have been tried and convicted for genocide<sup>91</sup> and crimes against humanity in the EPRDF-organised Red Terror Trials.<sup>92</sup> Here individual

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89. Felekech Metaferia Woldehana, *Sparkle: The Protégée of Emperor Haile Selassie: Memories of My Ethiopian Girlhood* (Trafford Publishing: Victoria, 2002), 246.

90. David M. Anderson, 'British abuse and torture in Kenya's counter-insurgency, 1952-1960', in *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol.23, nos.4-5 (2012).

91. On Ethiopia's unique genocide law, which made such convictions possible, see Firew Kebede Tiba, 'The Mengistu genocide trial in Ethiopia', in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol.5, no.2 (2007).

92. See the Special Prosecutor's Office's 'Dossier' of the Derg's crimes, which consistently links these to its organisational structures. Special Prosecutor's Office, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ** [*A Dossier Carrying Blood*] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2002 E.C. [2010]).

perpetrators, while still deemed responsible for their actions, are conceptualised as instruments in the hands of state-controlled organisational structures. The role of such organisational structures in making operational contexts during the Terror years, however, has not received any attention in the Ethiopian historiography. The relation of structure and agency in the shaping of perpetrators is yet to be examined.

Since Hannah Arendt published her thesis on the 'banality of evil', based on observations at the trial of the "terrifyingly normal" Nazi perpetrator Eichmann,<sup>93</sup> social psychologists and historians have increasingly uncovered how perpetrators tend to be made by normative social contexts, rather than simply being used by repressive regimes.<sup>94</sup> The perpetration of extreme violence in armed conflicts has in the vast majority of cases been found to be the product of situational social contexts rather than of individual predisposition or pathology. Situational social contexts, in other words, are central in shaping individual behaviour, including individual propensity to acts of extreme violence.<sup>95</sup>

These findings are supported and compellingly illustrated in *Violence Workers*, a seminal inter-disciplinary study of the history and psychology of torturers in Brazil's police force.<sup>96</sup> The worst police violence in Brazil, the study shows, was shaped by social-psychological and organisational processes within the police force rather than by

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93. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking Press: New York, 1963).

94. See for instance Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Printer and Martin: New York, 1974); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (Penguin: London, 2001); Philip Zimbardo, 'A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators', in Richard Falk, Irene Gendzier and Robert Jay Lifton (eds.), *Crimes of War: Iraq* (Nation Books: New York, 2006).

95. Zimbardo, 'A situationist perspective', 368.

96. Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros and Philip Zimbardo, *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2002).

individual perpetrators' social or psychological backgrounds. Operational cultures and organisational mandates were the central determinants of police behaviour, especially in cases of torture and extreme violence. The authors identify three particular organisational factors that played a prominent role in the making of perpetrators of extreme violence. All three factors have featured eminently in otherwise vastly diverse operational cultures that have shaped perpetrators across the globe. And since all three factors had close parallels in the organisational structures and practices that shaped perpetrators in the Ethiopian Terror, they are worth outlining in greater detail.

The first of these factors is a perceived 'atrocities environment', in which the group that needs to be controlled is seen as profoundly dangerous. The authors of *Violence Workers* argue that the practice and extent of internal organised violence is not primarily dependent on the formal political structure of a country. Rather, it depends on the existence of such a fear-filled atrocities environment, perceived by both the public and the security forces, in which the latter are assumed to be at war with a part of the population. Widespread societal paranoia and mistrust thus play a foundational role in the organisation and legitimisation of atrocities preparation.<sup>97</sup> Secondly, the authors note the centrality of the theme of 'national security' in violence-justifying discourses and ideologies. The threat of insurgents is presented not simply as an affront to the regime or even the state, but the nation itself. Repression thus becomes a national responsibility. Thirdly, the authors observe that organisational violence by the Brazilian police force was preceded by the de-personalisation of the victims. De-personalisation constituted an integral component of the process through which normative organisational structures generated the necessary moral disengagement in

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97. Huggins et al, *Violence Workers*, XX, 246.

perpetrators.<sup>98</sup> Such construction and essentialisation of socio-political categories of difference in order to incite collective violence is of course widely recognised.<sup>99</sup> Achille Mbembe sees the reification of persons and "the subordination of everything to impersonal logic and to the reign of calculability and rationality" as integral to the ontology of modern collective violence.<sup>100</sup> Through processes of de-personalisation, the bodies of opponents are reduced to representations of the target body politic.

Abbink has seen the main purpose of state terror in revolutionary Ethiopia in this process of de-personalisation, which de-humanised all opponents of the state and denied Ethiopians any identity independent from the state.<sup>101</sup> This may be imposing too simple and state-centred a model. But there is no doubt that processes of de-personalisation played a prominent role in shaping the perpetrators and driving the collective violence of early revolutionary Ethiopia. All of the factors identified by the study into Brazilian police torturers - perceptions of an atrocity environment, the invocation of a national security discourse and the de-personalisation of victims as part of the moral desensitisation and disengagement of perpetrators - also played a prominent role in the Ethiopian Terror. Related organisational factors supplemented these, such as the lack of organisational oversight over the kebeles, which meant that local actors were given not only instruments and discourses of violence but also impunity to use them as they saw fit. Analogous processes also framed the social contexts and violence-justifying discourses of the Urban Defense Squads that carried out the EPRP's assassination campaign.

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98. Huggins et al, *Violence Workers*, 250.

99. Hinton, 'The poetics of genocidal practice', 162.

100. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', in *Public Culture*, vol.15, no.1 (2003), 18.

101. Abbink, 'The impact of violence', 138.

A detailed history of the making of perpetrators through operational cultures and organisational narratives of security organisations and of political groups in revolutionary Ethiopia would require the writing of an additional and rather different thesis. But by analysing the history of some of the Terror's most infamous perpetrators, and by inquiring into their operational social contexts in the Derg's security apparatus and in Kebele offices, this study inserts the Ethiopian Terror into the comparative scholarship on the making of perpetrators in civil conflicts.

### **Methodology and sources**

In order to examine the history of the Ethiopian Terror, this thesis triangulates the existing literature with archival and oral sources. Whereas some of these sources have previously been drawn upon by scholars, many are here inserted into the historiography for the first time. Archival sources comprise such diverse records as government documents, clandestine publications, organisational bulletins, national and international news items, photographs, court proceedings and evidence, diplomatic records and grey literature. Oral sources, on the other hand, consist of thirty-four in-depth interviews, which have been conducted with a wide range of actors and analysts of the period. This section briefly surveys this array of sources, highlighting their strengths, densities, difficulties, omissions and biases.

The archival materials used in this study are drawn from archives located in four countries on three continents, and augmented by further records obtained from online digital archives. In Ethiopia, the rich collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at

Addis Ababa University provided access to contemporary publications. These included the official government dailies, *Addis Zemen* in Amharic and the Ethiopian Herald in English, and clandestine publications comprising, among scores of pamphlets and less prominent titles, both *Democrasia* ['Democracy'] and *YeSafiw Hizb Demz* ['Voice of the Broad Masses'], the official party organs of the EPRP and Meison respectively. Also located in Addis Ababa is the remarkable collection of official documents retrieved from all levels of the Derg's administrative structure and assembled by the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Red Terror Trials held through much of the 1990s and 2000s, more on which below. A third potential archive in Addis Ababa, the National Archive and Library of Ethiopia (NALE), offered no help with this project. While all official documents produced by the Ministry of Interior under the Derg regime were received by the archive in late 2010, these are yet to be catalogued. Comprising seventeen years' worth of bureaucratic output, this archive will only become usable to historians once this process is completed.

In stark contrast, two European archives hold comparatively few but surprisingly rich and easily accessible documents on the Ethiopian Terror years. In the British National Archives at Kew, the most notable records<sup>102</sup> are periodic accounts of violence in Addis Ababa from the British Embassy and reports by and about some of the 700 British citizens residing in Ethiopia during the Terror.<sup>103</sup> The archives of the East German secret service in Berlin,<sup>104</sup> on the other hand, reveal the extent of the socialist

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102. See especially record groups FCO 31 and 58.

103. Cf. FCO 31/2079-53, Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, 22 April 1977.

104. *Archiv des Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes* [Archive of the 'federal commissioner for the files of the state security service'].

country's involvement in revolutionary Ethiopia.<sup>105</sup> Such international archives open up new perspectives on Ethiopia's revolutionary violence, and particularly on the development of the Derg's security services and on the Terror's Cold War context.

A further significant archive on the period is the Thomas L. Kane Collection held by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., which I visited for three months as a Kluge Fellow in the Summer of 2012. A well-known scholar of Ethiopian history, culture and politics, Thomas Kane not only assembled one of the largest collections of literature on Ethiopia outside Addis Ababa University's Institute of Ethiopian Studies, he also meticulously collected news items, grey literature, official and underground publications on revolutionary Ethiopia. Among other useful materials, the collection provided access to government proclamations and to publications of its 'Revolution Information Center'; to pamphlets by labour union activists; and to letters and publications of revolutionaries, not least by student activists in Ethiopia as well as in the diaspora.

Finally, two online digital archives provided further materials on the Ethiopian Terror that informed this study. The 'Foreign Broadcast Information Service' (FBIS) contains regular summaries of news from and about Ethiopia throughout the period. The Library of Congress's digital 'Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection', on the other hand, contains interviews with most senior American diplomats who served in the Horn during the early revolutionary years. Many of these diplomats reflect on their experiences living in Addis Ababa during the Terror.

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105. The only studies examining this involvement to date are Toni Weis, 'Handcuffs for "Operation Friendship": The Red Terror seen from the archives of the East German secret service', in ERTDRC, *Documenting the Red Terror*, 81-7; see also Hans-Joachim Döring, *Es geht um unsere Existenz": Die Politik der DDR gegenüber der Dritten Welt am Beispiel von Mosambik und Äthiopien* (Ch. Links Verlag: Berlin, 1999) and Haile Gabriel Dagne, *The Commitment of the German Democratic Republic in Ethiopia* (Lit: Berlin, 2006).

At the beginning of this research project, the most promising set of archival records was the vast collection of official documents from Derg and Kebele offices used by the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) during the Red Terror Trials.<sup>106</sup> The SPO had been established by the EPRDF regime's Proclamation 22 in 1992 with a dual mandate: besides the primary aim of bringing Derg officials and collaborators to trial for human rights violations, the proclamation also noted that the SPO had to fulfil "a historical obligation to record for posterity the brutal offences [...] perpetrated against the people of Ethiopia".<sup>107</sup> The trials were thus intended to produce a detailed historical record of the Derg's human rights abuses, in large part to prevent their future repetition.

The groundwork for the fulfilment of this historical mandate was laid over the coming years, as the SPO compiled a remarkable 250.000 documents for the trials,<sup>108</sup> testimony to the Derg's thorough record-keeping.<sup>109</sup> While many of these documents concern the Derg's human rights abuses in other locations and at later stages, a significant proportion chronicles the violence of the Terror that gripped Addis Ababa between 1976 and 1978. Hundreds of witness statements were added to these documents to constitute the Prosecution's archive, which formed the basis of its indictment of Derg members and collaborators.<sup>110</sup>

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106. See chapter 6 on the history of the Red Terror Trials and on the narratives about the period that they developed and publicised.

107. The "Special Public Prosecutor's Office Establishment Proclamation No.22/1992" is accessible online at <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/Ethiopia-Charter.pdf>. [Last accessed July 2014]. See also ነጋ ሪገዝጣ [Negarit Gazeta] No.18 (1992) and Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 689-92.

108. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 722.

109. Most twentieth-century regimes have felt the need to chronicle their own violence and abuses in some depths, a fact which has caught the attention and constituted the work of numerous historians. An inverted logic seems to apply here: the greater the magnitude and public knowledge of the violence committed, the more that violence needs official explanation, justification and chronicling.

110. Document Affinity Group, 'Report on the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation & Research Center (ERTDRC)' (2009).

Yet in spite of the Office's historical mandate, its vast archive was never made public. The pursuit of its "historical obligation" to document the Derg's state terror was largely neglected. Apart from the publication of the indictments and judgments in the trials,<sup>111</sup> only a single volume containing and commenting on key sources was published.<sup>112</sup> Special Prosecutor Yosef Kiros concedes that his Office had failed in fulfilling its mandate of documenting the history of the Terror:

"[The SPO publication] maybe shows some very important things. But that is one book [...]. It doesn't include the documents, the witness statements. We failed. [...] The main stakeholder, the public, still doesn't have access. I am very sorry to say it. We didn't do our mandate effectively. We touched it, but we didn't do it effectively."<sup>113</sup>

Another organisation offered to fill the void left by the SPO's neglect of its historical mandate. The Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center (ERTDRC) was set up to document the historical realities of the Ethiopian Terror. By preserving and indexing existing historical records, most notably the SPO archive, the ERTDRC set out to educate the public about this important chapter in the modern history of Ethiopia and to facilitate research into it.

In July 2009, the government invited the ERTDRC to move into the space at the High Court that the dissolving SPO was vacating. By September 2009, a directive from the Prime Minister's Office ordered the SPO's archive to be transferred to the

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111. Special Prosecutor's Office, **ልዩ አቃቤ ሕግ በእነ ኮ/ል መንግሥቱ ኃ/ማሪያም ላይ ያቀረበው ክስና የፌዴራል ከፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ** ['The Indictment brought by the SPO in the Mengistu trial and the Verdict Given By the Federal High Court'] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]); Special Prosecutor's Office, **ክፍል ሁለት: የፌዴራል ክፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ** ['Part Two: The Verdict Given by the Federal High Court'] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]).

112. SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ**.

113. Interview, Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

ERTDRC.<sup>114</sup> The transfer of office space and custodianship over the documents had just begun when I first visited the archive during a preliminary research visit in April 2010. Known to provide detailed accounts of the Terror's violence on the ground and affording rare insight into the institutionalisation of violence under the Derg, the SPO archive promised to provide a strong foundation for this research project. Its difficulties, too, were apparent: only the material used by the SPO in the trials is catalogued; the amount of this catalogued material is daunting; and the archive only presents selective evidence of the Derg's violence, to the detriment of other sources and dynamics of violence during the period. The grain of the archive, in other words, is both pronounced and readily recognisable.

It soon emerged, however, that the Ethiopian government was hesitant to implement its own directives. The transfer of custodianship over the archive to the ERTDRC was halted. The organisation's entry unfavourably coincided with greater government restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs and with the opening of the 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum'. As this study argues, the Museum represents a highly public memorialisation project that is readily converted into political currency. Inevitably, it presents a more undifferentiated narrative in the service of regime interests than any responsible independent organisation could advance.

These developments limited the role of the SPO's documents in my research design. Instead of free access to the whole archive, I was only able to review evidence published by the SPO or already digitised by the ERTDRC. While this still included numerous and often important documents, a second level of restrictions in scope and

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114. Edward Kissi, 'Remembering Ethiopia's 'Red Terror': history of a private effort to preserve a public memory' in ERTDRC, *Documenting the Red Terror*.

selection raised methodological difficulties. Documents from the SPO archive remained valuable in understanding Kebele-level dynamics of violence and forms of centralised control. But the need to triangulate these sources with others that would complement them and offset their limitations and bias grew in importance. Besides the already discussed archival sources, these notably comprised oral interviews.

In order to understand the multiple interwoven but often conflicting narratives and experiences of the period, oral interviews were conducted with as diverse as possible a range of contemporary witnesses. Informants were in equal parts members or sympathisers of the EPRP, of Meison, or of neither organisation. They included women as well as men; analysts as well as participants of the period; the older as well as the younger generation; and local activists as well as party leaders and actors who attempted to remain politically uninvolved.<sup>115</sup> The life histories and perspectives of many of these actors are invisible from the archive and unheard in the literature; oral interviews alone enabled their insertion into the historical record.<sup>116</sup> Throughout this thesis, such life histories are used to put human faces to the facts and narratives of the Terror. They personalise dynamics of violence, vengeance and victimisation which too often are depicted in a depersonalised and generalised fashion.

Most of the interviews informing this study were informal conversations lasting several hours. While not rigidly structured, they were loosely organised around

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115. One omission that needs to be noted, however, is the lack of interviews with senior Derg members. The circumstances of the 2011 release of the senior Derg officials, who had been convicted in the Red Terror Trials, made contacting these Derg members unpromising and potentially unsafe for them. Fortunately, this omission is largely compensated by a number of Derg memoirs, which have offered perspectives into the inner workings, relations and decision-making processes within the Derg. See especially Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Red Sea Press: Trenton, 1989); Zenebe Feleke, ነበር ['It happened'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 1996 E.C. (2004); and Eshetu Wendemu, አይዎት በመንግስቱ ቤተ መንግስት.

116. Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge: New York, 2006).

recurring thematic clusters, allowing for triangulation with each other and with written sources. Through such triangulation, intersubjective patterns of experience and discourse emerged. For example, informants with widely varying backgrounds and socio-political roles during the period shared overlapping experiences of imprisonment and torture at length, thereby shedding light on conditions, social relations and violence within prisons. Analogously, analysis of informants' recollections reveals repeated patterns and common language registers in the narratives of members of the same political or social groups, evidencing a common process of memorialisation and the emergence of entrenched and often competing narratives of the period.

Both themes gleaned from the triangulation of oral sources - the lived experience of the Terror on the one hand and processes of its memorialisation and narration on the other - are developed further in subsequent chapters.<sup>117</sup> The intersubjectivity inherent in these themes undermines the traditional objections that continue to be occasionally raised against oral history: neither the charge of subjectivity nor doubts cast over the possibility of generalising from oral sources carried much weight in this project. The retrospective construction of oral sources, meanwhile, proved an asset to this study as it allowed for an inquiry into the scripting of collective memory.

Significantly more poignant than these common objections were the challenges inherent in conducting lengthy interviews about distressing and often raw memories of violence. The retelling of the past commonly also entails a partial reliving. For several informants, the process was an upsetting one, albeit one they wanted to participate in. Some interviews were marked by telling silences, lingering narrative circles and at

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117. See chapter 5 for accounts of prison experiences. An analysis of alternative narratives of the Terror is developed in chapter 6.

times unexpected encounters with profound personal pain.<sup>118</sup> Inevitably, as Peter Thompson has argued, oral history treads a fine line between historical investigation and therapeutic work.<sup>119</sup> For not unlike many forms of therapy involving the recollection of the past, oral history, in Alessandro Portelli's words, "refers [to] what the source and the historian do together at the moment of their encounter in the interview."<sup>120</sup> This cooperative nature of oral interviews allows the subjectivity inherent in all historical sources to be uniquely challenged and engaged.<sup>121</sup> In the case of interviews about experiences and memories of collective violence, however, this cooperative nature of oral sources also presents a challenge. Most significantly, it raises important methodological questions about my own positionality as a researcher of the Ethiopian Terror.

Inevitably, my own position and identity as a researcher who is - among other relevant factors - male, belonging to a younger generation, non-Ethiopian and yet Amharic-speaking influenced the dynamics and results of the interviews.<sup>122</sup> To date, the non-participant historian remains an anomaly in the context of the Ethiopian Terror. My lack of identification or involvement with any one group or position, and thus of bias internal to the conflicts of the period, allowed me to approach, interrogate and evaluate

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118. During a preliminary meeting for an interview with Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, I asked him whether he had any children. The question evoked a long pause, before he replied: "No. You see, I too was a victim."

119. Peter Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000), 181.

120. Alessandro Portelli, 'Oral history as genre', in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (eds.), *Narrative and Genre* (Transaction Publishers: London, 1998), 98.

121. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 173.

122. Compare Antonius Robben, 'The politics of truth and emotion among victims and perpetrators of violence', in Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (eds.), *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995).

witness statements impartially and to earn the equal trust of conflicting actors.<sup>123</sup> This is not, of course, a claim to be the neutral observer and analyst envisioned by 'the old history' which was so vehemently opposed by the *Annales* School. Another historian would have selected different documents for inclusion, chosen other angles of analysis and crafted a different narrative from the same material. My selections and judgments are bound to reflect my own values, the developing framework of the project and, not least, a number of contingent factors. Selection of sources, for instance, was often circumscribed by heteronomous factors. Beyond the already discussed difficulties in accessing the SPO archive, this was particularly the case with visual sources.

Visual sources of the Ethiopian Terror years are scarce. Publicly accessible collections are held by the IES and by the small library of the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum. The vast majority of visual sources of the period, however, consist of photographs in private possession, the finding of which is inevitably highly dependent on contingent factors. It was thus only through a family acquaintance that I found two remarkable photographs in the private collection of Shimelis Desta in a suburban north London home. Shimelis had been employed as an official photographer at Haile Selassie's court, and continued to work for the government after the revolution. In 1977, he was commissioned to take pictures of the corpses of supposed counter-revolutionaries that had been left lying on the streets of Addis Ababa. One can only speculate as to the purpose of these photographs; use for counter-insurgency purposes, especially interrogation, represents the most likely option. In 1981 Shimelis fled Ethiopia and arranged for his photographic archive, comprising over 7000 negatives, to

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123. I should note that this was not universally the case. One informant found out that my wife's uncle had been a member of one of leading parties, and required third-party assurance that this family connection - which I only became aware of at a later stage myself - had not shaped my intentions.

be smuggled out of the country via diplomatic channels. His officially commissioned pictures of murdered Red Terror victims offer a revealing perspective on the Derg's state terror.

These images complemented others from the IES and the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum. With these collections, too, selection and use were restricted by heteronomous factors. Neither institution keeps a record of the photographer, the reason for which the images were taken or commissioned, or in most instances even the date and place of particular pictures. The result is a lack of contextualisation which makes most pictures unusable for academic research. The problems posed by such lack of contextualisation are tellingly exemplified by a photograph I found at the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum. The image shows a young man being interrogated using the infamous *Wofe Ilala* torture method, in which the suspect is tied and suspended by his knee joints, leaving soles and buttocks exposed for beating. Three interrogators lean over the suspect; their eyes have been subsequently covered with black bars, supposedly to conceal their identity. When I showed the image to film maker Ermias Wolde Amlak, he recognised the supposed interrogators as actors he had hired and the image as a scene from his film 'The Father'.<sup>124</sup> No note had marked the picture as a cinematographic reconstruction, and it is being kept with genuine images from the period - and presented as such - in the Museum's library. In depicting a widespread torture method which many of my informants have suffered the image is not without value. As the historical document it is presented as, however, it is profoundly misleading. In light of such difficulties, only a very limited number of pictures kept at

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124. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

these institutions - largely those with descriptions or portraying known figures or events - could be used for this project.

The unacknowledged inclusion of a film's scene of torture in the image collection of an institution devoted to chronicling the history of the Derg's Red Terror raises another important methodological consideration in studies of violence, one not limited to the proper use of visual sources. This is the danger of a 'pornographic gaze', the common tendency to privilege the aesthetics and physical applications of violence over an inquiry into its historical, social and cultural causes, dynamics and effects. Histories of violence thus easily degenerate

"into a theatre or pornography of violence in which the voyeuristic impulse subverts the larger project of witnessing, critiquing, and writing against violence, injustice and suffering."<sup>125</sup>

This risk becomes greater where the analysed violence is more local and hence more intimate.<sup>126</sup>

A final matter that ought to be addressed in this discussion of methodology concerns the project's focus on Addis Ababa. As the centre of Ethiopia's intense state politics, it might be argued that the capital is "the wrong thermometer to take the temperature of Ethiopian affairs."<sup>127</sup> However, most of the events that shaped the urban-based revolution took place there, and the Terror's impetus, central locus and violent climax were all situated in the city. Furthermore, we shall see by drawing on local histories of other towns that the Terror's national dynamics and outcomes were shaped by events in

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125. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace*, 1.

126. Cf. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (Granta Books: London, 1999), introduction.

127. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 168.

Addis Ababa. The limited focus on merely one, politically central location is also required by the task of this thesis: to understand both the local and the supra-local dynamics of the Terror, and to narrate both an intimate history of violence and a national one.

### **The structure of the study**

The following three chapters provide a chronological outline and introduce a periodisation of the Terror years in Addis Ababa. They examine the social and political history of the emergence and development of the Terror and trace the dynamics of the period's escalating violence. Throughout these chapters institutional and organisational histories are supplemented by a focus on social developments, and local and supra-local dynamics alike are inquired into. This approach allows for the disaggregation of interrelated but often competing forms of agency, and for an understanding of the aggregate production of collective violence.

These three chronological chapters identify three major phases of the Terror. The first phase ranges from the emergence of urban violence in early revolutionary Ethiopia to Mengistu Haile Mariam's rise to Chairmanship of the Derg in February 1977; this phase was marked by the spread and militarisation of political categories, by the polarisation of identities and by the escalation of conflicts. The second phase spans from February to August 1977, when Meison ended its 'critical support' for the regime and went underground; these months witnessed intense contestation and new forms of state terror, but also the climax of decentralised agency and of localised regimes of

violence. The final phase of the urban violence largely coincided with the Ogaden war against Somalia, but extended beyond it into late 1978. It was dominated by the officially proclaimed 'Red Terror', the peak of Ethiopia's urban violence. This phase entailed a bureaucratisation of violence, as the Derg established unprecedented control over the capital and inscribed its strategies and practices of repression into the state apparatus. This study therefore proposes a periodisation of the Ethiopian Terror that differs in key respects from earlier models.<sup>128</sup> Like the classic periodisations of the French revolution, this outline of the Terror "is in fact a chronology of violence".<sup>129</sup> It revises our understanding of the Terror's changing modes of violence as well as of the varying agency of key actors in its production. This periodisation thereby explains how the Terror continued to shape Ethiopian state and society beyond its declared ending in 1978.

Chapters five and six of this study move from a chronological outline of the Terror's history to a topical presentation and analysis of the lived experience and memorialisation of the period. In these chapters, memories of the Terror as conveyed in oral interviews become the primary sources of this study. Thus chapter five inquires into contemporary witnesses' lived experiences of the Terror in the defining spheres of urban life. Chapter six examines how memories of the Terror have been collectively structured and disseminated. It traces the emergence of readily distinguishable narrative traditions about Ethiopia's revolutionary violence, and reviews the highly contested and politicised memorialisation process. Finally, the concluding chapter surveys the contributions of this study to the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution, to wider

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128. The most authoritative periodisation to date is found in Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror'.

129. Colin Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 58.

themes in the African historiography of conflict and to interdisciplinary discussions on collective violence.

## Chapter 2 - **Radicals and Soldiers**

### The Emergence of Collective Violence, to February 1977

The process which culminated in the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1974 left urban Ethiopia with a power vacuum to be filled and a revolution to be defined. Disparate political groups emerged, vying with one another to claim and to shape the ongoing revolution. The result were the political cleavages that would shape the Ethiopian Terror, dominated by the military regime on the one hand and flourishing civilian Marxist organisations on the other. While negotiating internal discussions over how to define and position themselves, these political groups strove to mobilise support beyond their constituencies. The neighbourhoods of early revolutionary Addis Ababa provided fertile ground for doing so, as the political involvement of the urban population had reached unprecedented proportions during the months of strikes and demonstrations that had brought down the imperial system. Popular identification with revolutionary politics grew rapidly in the build-up to the Ethiopian Terror. Rival political structures, programmes and identities not only developed and spread, but were also absorbed and socialised into alternative, often highly local ties and conflicts.

The diffusion of political categories and identities went hand in hand with their militarisation. By September 1976, the heated contestation of political space escalated into armed confrontation, shaped by rival campaigns of revolutionary violence. The Derg sought to violently contain the threat posed by the increasingly popular Ethiopian

People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), launching a first wave of state-instigated repression. The EPRP in turn commenced a campaign of selective violence, assassinating members of the military regime and civilian collaborators. The Ethiopian Terror years had begun.

This chapter traces these developments, surveying the background and onset of collective violence in urban Ethiopia. Delineating the evolution, radicalisation and social underpinnings of political categories and identities, it examines the emergence of revolutionary violence. Preceding dynamics that directly impinged on the Terror are highlighted by drawing on earlier studies alongside perspectives gleaned from the recent burst of participant memoirs and from domestic and international archival sources. The primary focus, however, is a reconstruction of the period between September 1976 and February 1977, relying primarily on oral sources. Marked by an ascendant urban opposition as much as by haphazard state violence, these months constituted the first phase of Ethiopia's urban Terror.

Examining the onset of revolutionary urban violence from supra-local as well as local perspectives, the chapter calls attention to two features of the early urban violence that would continue to shape and define the Terror throughout its duration: on the one hand, the early campaigns of sustained revolutionary violence generated an incendiary atrocity environment that would kindle and fuel the subsequent Terror. On the other hand, the adoption of revolutionary terror campaigns divided and fragmented both the regime and the opposition, reconfiguring political alliances as much as local outworkings of violence.

## Bourgeoisie, students, revolutionaries

By the onset of the Terror in 1976, Ethiopia's revolutionary situation had redefined the meaning and matrix of youth in Addis Ababa. Political concerns and identity markers had widely subsumed other domains of life, and political activism had for many become both a full-time occupation and an initiation into adulthood.

Like many in his generation, Aklilu Kebede decided to devote himself to revolutionary struggle as a teenager. At seventeen years old, he had become the chairman of the Youth Association of his local Urban Dweller Association (*Kebele*) in the vicinity of Arat Kilo. His daily life consisted of activities few Ethiopian teenagers would have understood or recognised a decade earlier, but which were now in keeping with the social norms and expectations of his peers:

"We tried to approach youths, to bring them to a study group, discuss Marxism-Leninism, discuss the importance of organisation, discuss the need to be involved because they are the youths, this era belongs to them. They were the generation. This requires their involvement. [...] We tried to organise the women's association, the workers' association, we distributed pamphlets. We did some practical work to tell the people of Ethiopia that the EPRP is here to lead them to victory. All these things: organising, recruiting, and day to day organisational work. That is how most of the time was spent."<sup>1</sup>

Marxist political activism among the capital's young had first occurred in the early 1960s through a University group known as "the Crocodile Society".<sup>2</sup> Driven by a

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1. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

2. Randi Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1974* (East Lansing, 1985), 118.

disparate range of factors, it had gained increasing currency in the subsequent generation of the Ethiopian Student Movement.<sup>3</sup> By the early years of the revolution, it had become commonplace. Marxism became the new orthodoxy. High School and University students joined the newly emerged political organisations in large numbers, with the EPRP attracting the largest share of supporters. The private and social lives of young activists were rapidly politicised. Aklilu Kebede speaks for many when he recalls the close association he made between youth - belonging to "the generation" - and political activism: "This is my responsibility as a youth, I have to take part in this revolution."<sup>4</sup> The discontinuity with the largely apolitical activities and aspirations of earlier generations of youths in the capital is evident.

To understand this shift, which was to play a central role in the emergence of the Terror, we will need to retrace the processes by which urban Ethiopia's political landscape was transformed. Three developments in particular need to be reviewed in order to contextualise the social and political changes that occurred during the build-up to the Terror: firstly, the emergence of a new westernised 'middle class' in post-war Ethiopia, and its ambiguous relations to the imperial state. Secondly, the development and radicalisation of the Student Movement (ESM). And finally, the eruption of revolutionary uprisings and their immediate political effects. These processes have been the subjects of substantial historical research in their own right.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the following overview is not to add to this scholarship, but rather to identify background

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3. Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, c.1960-1974* (James Currey: Oxford, 2014), 151.

4. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

5. There has been a recent revival of academic interest in the history of the ESM and of the 1974 revolution in particular. See especially Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*; Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflict*; Paulos Milkias, *Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution in Ethiopia* (Cambria Press: New York, 2006).

themes that are essential to our understanding of early revolutionary Ethiopia's urban confrontations.

***(i) New urban middle classes***

The first of these background themes concerns the new middle classes that matured in the decades before the 1974 revolution. Seeking to check the power of the traditional nobility and to staff the developing bureaucracy of the Ethiopian state, Emperor Haile Selassie I had actively encouraged the formation of a new meritocratic elite, free from regional interests and loyal to the central court.<sup>6</sup>

The new elite evolved in Ethiopia's urban areas, working at the nascent institutions of the modern centralised state and developing its own subculture, distinguished by the performance and consumption of a westernised lifestyle. New educational and cultural institutions were built on western models, from the Haile Selassie I University to theatres and official music bands. Alongside a flourishing scene of cafés, hotels and nightclubs, they became the arenas in which the cultural identities and intellectual discourses of the new elite were developed and negotiated.<sup>7</sup>

Western education, through the 1960s increasingly attained outside Ethiopia, became the meritocratic foundation of this new elite.<sup>8</sup> Messay Kebede has forcefully

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6. Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1965), 183-4; cf. John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1974).

7. Interviews, Shifferaw Bekele, 9 September 2011 and Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

8. Paulos Milkias and Messay Kebede (eds.), *Education, Politics and Social Change in Ethiopia* (Tsehay Publishers: Los Angeles, 2010), *passim*.

argued that the encounter with western education led to an experience of 'cultural dislocation' for the students involved;<sup>9</sup> a more positive perspective would note the fruits of cultural hybridity produced by the new elite's cosmopolitan linkages. These made late imperial Addis Ababa "the very essence of modernist audacity."<sup>10</sup> Jazz music and the visual arts flourished, modernistic buildings were erected and intellectual discourses about progress and liberty proliferated. A new set of Ethiopian identities, at once urban and cosmopolitan, emerged. The ranks of this new elite grew as the bureaucratisation of the state allowed for new forms of social mobility through education and employment.<sup>11</sup> New middle classes took form, blurring traditional social boundaries.

Whilst these middle classes constituted an essential pillar of the centralised state, their relations with the latter became increasingly problematic through the 1960s and into the early 1970s. Two factors in particular affected the deteriorating symbiosis between the imperial regime and its newly-formed middle classes: firstly, tension grew over demands for political reform and expressions of dissent. Such demands were as diverse as the actors who voiced them: conservatives close to the Emperor gently counselled constitutional reforms to release the mounting pressure on the court. Radical students and intellectuals demanded comprehensive land reform, the end of imperial rule and socialism. The ageing Emperor's unwillingness to make concessions to any such demands exacerbated the growing tensions.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, 2008), passim. For a critique of Messay's emphases, see Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 151.

10. Francis Falceto, 'Introduction' in *The Very Best of the Ethiopiques* (Audio CD, Buda Musique, 2005).

11. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten: living through marginality in Addis Ababa's inner city', D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford (2012), ch.3.

12. Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 173f.

Secondly, relations were strained by the imperial regime's fiscal inability to integrate the growing number of graduates into the state bureaucracy.<sup>13</sup> This left many urban Ethiopians with bleak prospects and prone to "the alienation that arises when self-realisation becomes unattainable."<sup>14</sup> The narratives of modernity and teleologies of progress, which had come to occupy so central a place in the discursive landscape of urban Ethiopia, no longer appeared compatible with the imperial regime that had nurtured them for decades. Widely politicised, these new middle classes formed the initial core constituencies of early revolutionary Ethiopia's major political groups.<sup>15</sup> From among them came many of the leading actors, and indeed many of the victims, of the urban Terror.

### ***(ii) The Ethiopian student movement***

The second background theme that needs to be considered here concerns the history of the student movement and the many legacies it bequeathed to revolutionary Ethiopia. As Clapham has argued, Ethiopia's revolutionary intelligentsia never left the shadows of the ESM behind, instead continuing to reflect and reproduce its arguments, alliances and animosities.<sup>16</sup> The influence of the ESM on revolutionary Ethiopia and its urban violence was profound and multifaceted, ranging from the introduction of radical leftist

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13. Abebe Zegeye, 'Social change and revolution in Ethiopia', D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford (1984), 235.

14. Paulos Milkias, *Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution*, 242.

15. Cf. John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (James Currey: Oxford, 2011), chapters 6, 8-9.

16. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 52.

politics over the formation of influential political organisations to the transmission of social practices of engagement.<sup>17</sup>

In recent years, there has been renewed research into the dynamics and legacies of the student movement, largely driven by former participants.<sup>18</sup> In light of the extent and rapidity of the radicalisation process among Ethiopian students, questions surrounding this process have featured prominently in academic studies.<sup>19</sup> An emerging consensus explains the radicalisation of the ESM, which would affect an entire generation of young Ethiopians following the revolution, with reference to normative, experiential and situational variables. To begin with, normative value-judgments played a prominent role. As the imperial regime remained averse to reform and failed to embody the modernity it promised, it was increasingly identified with structural injustices in the country. For many students, the politicisation process was driven by an engagement with the economic and social plight of the peasantry.<sup>20</sup> In interviews, most informants ascribed their radicalisation to moral indignation at Ethiopia's systemic injustices.<sup>21</sup>

Such moral indignation was almost invariably channeled towards socialist politics. In March 1965, a demonstration demanding '*Meret LeArashu*' ['Land to the Tiller']

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17. Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, passim.

18. See Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students: their struggle to articulate the Ethiopian Revolution* (N. Type: Chicago, 1990); Randi Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression: State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952-2005* (Addis Ababa University Press: Addis Ababa, 2007); Paulos Milkias, *Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution*; Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation*; Bahru Zewde (ed.). *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History* (Forum for Social Studies: Addis Ababa, 2010); Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*.

19. See especially the discussions in Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation*, passim.

20. Prominent student leader Berhane Meskel, for instance, frequently ascribed his politicisation to engagement with the plight of his own grandfather's tenant farmers. Cf. Interview with Tadelech Haile Mikael, who was Berhane Meskel's wife, 30 March 2012.

21. See especially Interviews, Mekonnen Getu, 13 April 2010; Kiflu Tadesse, 6 January 2012; Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

became "a breakthrough in the Student Movement,"<sup>22</sup> introducing a new stage of collective protests. Young urban intellectuals increasingly came to see themselves as the mouthpieces and defenders - the 'vanguard' - of Ethiopia's oppressed masses, rural and urban. This perception, reinforced by Marxist theory and subsequent experiences, was to play an important role in the Terror years, driving the reification of "the people" as a political instrument. The effects of the 'Land to the Tiller' demonstration indicates a further important theme in the radicalisation process, namely the impact of several incisive events and experiences. All informants who participated in the student movement recalled the politicising influence of the events surrounding the death of student leader Tilahun Gizaw, whose killing by security forces in December 1969 sparked demonstrations in which further students were shot.<sup>23</sup> Such experiences of repression and effective activism exacerbated the alienation between student activists and the regime, driving the radicalisation of the former.

Finally, the radicalisation of Ethiopian students needs to be understood in its wider international context. From its inception, the ESM was influenced by the political perspectives of students from other countries. In the late 1950s, students from across Africa came to Addis Ababa on scholarships offered by Haile Selassie, politicised in their home countries' independence struggles and dismayed by the apolitical atmosphere they found on campus. Their regular three-page flyer, *Campus Star*, is credited by some with first inspiring political activism among Ethiopian students.<sup>24</sup> More significant was the influence of the vibrant international student movements

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22. Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students*, 117.

23. See especially Interviews, Girma Bashe, 14 march 2012 and Kiflu Tadesse, 19 July 2012. Cf. Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's Students*, 237.

24. See for example the oral testimonies of Asfaw Damte and Eyesuswork Zafu in Bahru Zewde, *Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement*, 19-24.

Ethiopians encountered and participated in when studying abroad in the 1960 and early 1970s. The radicalism of the ESM was embedded in this wider culture of student radicalism at western universities, a fact reflected in the ways Marxism was approached and conceptualised by Ethiopian students: invariably, Marxist theory and experience was read through sympathetic and idealistic western lenses rather than as it was reflected in the realities of socialist societies.<sup>25</sup>

With the advance of radicalism at the Universities, an increasing number of students came to view their educational institutions more as fora for revolutionary agitation than as a means for the acquisition of academic degrees. On the eve of the revolution, Marxism-Leninism had become the normative ideological position within the ESM; "not to be a Marxist was considered heretical."<sup>26</sup> Soon, such assumptions of Marxist orthodoxy would spread significantly beyond the narrow confines of student circles.

The spread of radicalisation into wider society was driven by the major political organisations that themselves grew out of the ESM. Beginning in the 1960s, some students had begun to look beyond the ESM and argued that the foundations for Ethiopia's vanguard party had to be laid. The question of political organisation and eventual party formation was first discussed at the fourth conference of the Ethiopian Student's Union in Europe in 1964.<sup>27</sup> Five years later, in 1969, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Meison), the first of many political organisations to spring from the ESM, was founded.<sup>28</sup> This was followed in 1972 by the Ethiopian People's Liberation

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25. Forest Colburn, 'The tragedy of Ethiopia's intellectuals', in *Antioch Review*, vol.47, no.2 (1989), 143.

26. Colburn, 'The tragedy of Ethiopia's intellectuals', 136.

27. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጩ ረጅም ጉዞ, 10.

28. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 1-4

Organisation, the forerunner of the EPRP.<sup>29</sup> Both Meison and the EPRP, the political organisations that dominated the urban politics of the Terror, thus had their origins in the ESM. In their conflicts, their ad hominem arguments and their emphasis on the history and theory of revolution rather than on practical solutions to the challenges of Ethiopia's revolutionary situation, these organisations continued to reflect core features of the ESM.<sup>30</sup>

### ***(iii) Revolutionary uprisings***

Our third and final background theme concerns the unfolding of Ethiopia's revolutionary uprisings. By early 1974, a concatenation of mutinies, strikes and demonstrations was eroding the authority of the *ancien régime* and erupting into political revolution. The events of this escalating revolution, and of the ageing Emperor's deposition by the newly-formed 'Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army' - or Derg - have been documented and analysed in other studies and need not be reproduced here.<sup>31</sup> However, two observations concerning the events of 1974 that are particularly pertinent to the history of the subsequent Terror ought to be briefly highlighted.

Thus firstly, Ethiopia's revolutionary process was from the beginning defined by a conglomeration of diverse actors, interests and agendas. As political space for public

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29. See the discussion in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation*, passim.

30. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 131; cf, Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, passim.

31. See especially Bahru Zewde, *Modern Ethiopia*, 228-35; Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 51-74; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 37-71; Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflict*, passim.

collective action opened up, it was filled by widely varying expressions of demand and dissent: soldiers mutinied for better pay, taxi drivers protested the price of petrol, Muslims sought equal religious recognition.<sup>32</sup> Yet subsequent narratives of the revolution, whether by the military regime or by civilian political organisations, have sought to domesticate this diversity and to streamline the conglomerate nature of the revolution into a single unit of analysis.<sup>33</sup> Supposedly unitary categories such as 'the will of the broad masses' were routinely identified with political programmes and invoked to legitimise these. Contrary to such depictions, the revolution needs to be understood not as one homogenous process but rather as an agglomeration of complex and heterogenous events and dynamics.<sup>34</sup> This agglomerate character would similarly come to define the subsequent Terror.

It should also be noted that neither the military regime nor the civilian parties played a significant role in the revolutionary process until June 1974, and hence until the final months before the overthrow of the Emperor. While politicised students actively took part in urban performances of dissent, very few were at this stage associated with any of the political organisations that were soon to emerge from the ESM and to define Addis Ababa's political life.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, public debates over the post-imperial order did not occur until the final months before the overthrow of the Emperor. Attempts to define and fix the fluid and multifaceted revolutionary process in the mould

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32. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 51-74; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 37-60.

33. See for example Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *Ethiopia in Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977); *Democrasia* Special Issue, February 1976.

34. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 35

35. Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 249f.

of a single-minded struggle for socialist democracy, which still find a voice in participant narratives of the period, are thus anachronistic.

What these narratives reveal, however, is a second feature of the revolutionary process that needs to be highlighted here: the demise of the *ancien régime* initiated a scramble for popular support and a struggle to define and forge a new, revolutionary social order. Legitimacy was claimed in the name of representing, and speaking for, the reified 'people'.<sup>36</sup> The following years were to be defined by an intense contestation of urban space and institutions as rival political groups and organisations sought to display such revolutionary support and legitimacy.

### **Contesting and defining political space**

The two years from the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1974 to the onset of the urban Terror in September 1976 witnessed an escalating contestation of political space, as rival political groups sought to define themselves as well as Ethiopia's unfolding revolution. For the military regime, these years were marked by a fragile grip on state power, debilitated further by internal factionalism. Civilian organisations, meanwhile, succeeded in expanding their support bases across urban Ethiopia, diffusing not only their political visions but also their growing animosities. These two years of intense contestation generated the incendiary political and social contexts within which the Ethiopian Terror would erupt.

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36. Mengistu Haile Mariam for instance claimed legitimacy by identifying his "revolutionary camp" with "the side of the people": Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *PMAC Chairman and the World Press* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1978).

***(i) Emerging revolutionary groups and identities***

The early Derg lacked internal cohesion and political vision. Its vague slogans of *Ityopia Tikdem* ['Ethiopia First'], promoted in place of a political programme, cast the new regime as the guardian of Ethiopian nationalism, the lowest common denominator of its over one hundred members.<sup>37</sup> That this council of low-level officers had been able to assume control of the state was due to the same factors that underwrote military rule across Africa in the 1970s: in the context of a crumbling *ancien régime*, the military alone had the institutional organisation and the means of power to step into the emerging political vacuum. To retain control of the state, these factors would not be sufficient. The Derg would need to reinvent itself. More immediately, however, it relied on the violent use of the military means at its disposal.

External dissent and internal disputes alike were addressed through a recourse to violent means. Thus early expressions of dissent, whether stemming from the Engineering Corps and the Army Aviation within the military, or from the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) in civil society, were violently put down.<sup>38</sup> The the first Derg massacre to receive international attention was the massacre of "the sixty" on 23 November 1974: more than fifty high officials of the *ancien régime*

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37. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution and the role of the Soviet Union', in Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa: New York, 1988), 90; Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*, 49; Ottaways, *Empire in Revolution*, 57-8.

38. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 73-4; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 15-6.

were executed, alongside the Derg's own head of state, Aman Andom.<sup>39</sup> An Eritrean, a Protestant, an advocate of non-military solutions to the Eritrean insurrection and of non-violent dealings with imperial officials,<sup>40</sup> Aman had fallen foul of the radical section within the Derg. Similar purges of external dissenters and internal opponents remained a defining feature of Derg rule before and through the urban Terror.<sup>41</sup> Due to internal purges and assassinations by opponents, less than half of the Derg's initial members survived beyond 1978.<sup>42</sup> The use of force quickly became central to the Derg's mode of rule, making it "one of the bloodiest and most authoritarian [regimes] anywhere in the world."<sup>43</sup> The state violence that would attain its climax in the Terror thus had significant antecedents.

The Derg's evident will to retain and consolidate state power from the onset generated a spirited civilian opposition. Most vocal were the Marxist parties that announced themselves in Addis Ababa in the dying days of the imperial regimes, most notably the EPRP and Meison.<sup>44</sup> Although both organisations had been agitating for revolution, the suddenness of the urban uprisings caught both by surprise.<sup>45</sup> It was hence only five months after the eruption of urban uprisings, and a month after the

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39. Asfa Wossen Asserate, *Ein Prinz aus dem Hause David* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 2007), ch.1; Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 23; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 77.

40. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 44.

41. Most notable were the purges of leading Derg members Sisay Habte Wold in June 1976, Tafari Bante in February 1977, and Atnafu Abate in November 1977. Cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 182-3, 190; Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 33; *The Economist*, 'Ethiopia: Plots and Shots' (24 July 1976), 41.

42. Getatchew Mekasha, 'Remarks on the Ethiopian revolution: a personal view' in Hess, Robert (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1979), 815.

43. Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since 1800* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011), 173.

44. For a concise discussion of the origins of these political organisations, see Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 249-58

45. Interviews, Kiflu Tadesse, 19 July 2012 and Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

formation of the Derg, that these organisations announced themselves to the Ethiopian public through their clandestine publications. The EPRP's *Democrasia*, by far the more popular of the two and soon "the most coveted and widely read clandestine newspaper,"<sup>46</sup> was first released in July 1974.<sup>47</sup> Meison's *YeSafiw Hizb Demz* ['Voice of the Broad Masses'] followed in August.<sup>48</sup>

Initially, both papers took aim at the emerging military regime and demanded the immediate formation of a 'provisional people's government'. *Democrasia* argued that the Derg, being itself undemocratic, non-representative and prone to violence could not guarantee democratic rights and therefore demanded an immediate transition to a government "for the people, by the people".<sup>49</sup> *YeSafiw Hizb Demz* similarly contended that a military government could not raise living standards for the people or recognise their democratic rights, and warned against the proneness of military rule to mature into human rights denying dictatorship by pointing to a host of global precedents.<sup>50</sup> The shared demand was for an end to military rule and a transfer of power to a people's government.<sup>51</sup>

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46. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian Revolution and the Red Terror', in ERTDRC, *Documenting the Red Terror: Bearing Witness to Ethiopia's Lost Generation* (ERTDRC: Ottawa, 2012), 43.

47. *Democrasia*, vol.1, no.1, Hamle 15 1966 E.C. [22 July 1974]: አለብሰው ቢያርስ በአረም ይመለሱ ['Hasty ploughing results in weeds']

48. *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.1, 14 Nehase 1966 E.C. [20 August 1974], የእንቅስቃሴው ባለቤት ሳፊው ሕዝብ ነው ['The owners of the movement are the broad masses'].

49. *Democrasia*, no.3, Hamle 25 1966 E.C. [1 August 1974]: ለውጥ ለሕዝብ ብሕዝብ ['Change from the people for the people'].

50. *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.5, Pagumen 5 1966 E.C. [10 September 1974], ደሞክራሲያዊ ረፍብሊክ ወይስ የወታደር መንግስት ['Democratic republic or military rule'], 5-6.

51. Margaret Hall Baissa, 'Civil-military elite interaction in the Ethiopian revolution: the case of students' in Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1979), 778; cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 71.

The politicisation of urban civil society was accelerated by the return of large numbers of Ethiopian students from abroad, seeking to participate in the unfolding revolutionary process. While no comprehensive numbers of returnees exist, available figures on Ethiopians studying in the United States give an indication of the extent and socio-political impact of the return. Following decades of gradual increase, the number of Ethiopian students in the United States increased rapidly during the final years of the imperial regime. In 1970, the total passed 500 for the first time; by 1973, there were already 1000; and in 1974, the number peaked at 1289. Yet by 1975, in the year following the revolution, a mere 323 were left.<sup>52</sup> These American figures are reflected in anecdotal evidence from European countries.<sup>53</sup> Ethiopian students overwhelmingly returned to their country, determined to shape Ethiopia's new revolutionary society and politics. While some joined rural insurgencies, such as the EPRP's fledgling guerilla army at Assimba, most settled in the urban areas, and particularly in Addis Ababa. Their return had immediate local effects.

On the ground, the influx of radical students contributed to the advancing politicisation of youth culture and in the developing mobilisation race of the political organisations. The ESM's normative commitment to Marxism-Leninism rapidly diffused and was embraced by thousands of urban youths within a matter of months. This spread of revolutionary ideology was closely tied to the narratives of modernity on which the urban middle classes had been founded. Integral to these narratives were teleologies of progress depicting Ethiopia as being 'behind' and needing to 'catch up' along a unified path of modernity. The identification of Marxism-Leninism with the

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52. Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*, 39.

53. Interviews, Mekonnen Getu, 13 April 2010; Negede Gobeze and Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

vector of this progress, combined with the new orthodoxy's ability to appear at once progressive and local, played a fundamental role in its rapid spread and acceptance.<sup>54</sup> A local bookstore selling Marxist literature near Addis Ababa University illustrates the quick dissemination of revolutionary ideology: the radical literature proved so popular that every new shipment sold out immediately.<sup>55</sup>

Besides stimulating the politicisation of urban society, the returnees also swelled the ranks of the emerging civilian political organisations. These comprised the EPRP and Meison as well as smaller groups such as the Marxist Leninist Revolutionary Organisation (Malerid), The Labour League (Wez League) and the Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle (Ichat). The influence of returned students was felt most deeply within Meison, where it sparked intensive internal discussions and ultimately led to an about-turn in political strategy. Until the return of founding leaders Haile Fida, Negede Gobeze and Andargachew Assegid in January and February 1975, Meison in Addis Ababa was led by a large group of domestic leaders.<sup>56</sup> These men had presided over Meison's initial decision to take a position on military rule similar to that of the EPRP, denouncing the Derg as 'fascist' and 'anti-people'.<sup>57</sup> The military, they argued on the eve of the Emperor's deposition, "does not answer the people's questions" and "does not lead by the masses' desires".<sup>58</sup> Following the massacre of dignitaries of the *ancien régime* in November 1974, Meison's organ, *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, denounced

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54. cf. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, passim.

55. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 116.

56. For a list, see Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 4.

57. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 7-9.

58. *YSHD*, no.5, Pagumen 5 1966 E.C. [10 September 1974], ደሞክራሲያዊ ረፑብሊክ ወይስ የወታደር መንግስት [‘Democratic republic or military rule’].

the Derg's Major Mengistu Haile Mariam as an "Ethiopian Hitler".<sup>59</sup> And when the regime announced its vague concept of *Hebretesebawinet* ['Ethiopian Socialism'] in December 1974,<sup>60</sup> Meison fiercely criticised it for failing to distinguish classes and for hence deviating from "the only scientific socialism".<sup>61</sup>

The return of Meison leaders from Europe led to a suspension of this uncompromising opposition to military rule and triggered intense internal debates. Negede Gobeze remembers that "those of us who were in Europe rejected the idea of the call for a provisional government. And those inside were calling for that."<sup>62</sup> The debate ended when, on 3 February 1975, the Derg issued its far-reaching Land Reform Proclamation. The resultant transformation of entrenched power- and property-relations made the case for viewing the Derg as a revolutionary force tenable. Meison leaders had already been involved in talks with the Derg in January 1975.<sup>63</sup> The road towards such talks had been paved by the regime's ambitious *Zemecha* ['Campaign']<sup>64</sup> for 'Development through Cooperation', in which 60.000 University and High School students were sent across the country on a literacy and education campaign,<sup>65</sup> as well as

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59. *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.15, Hedar 17 1967 E.C. [26 November 1974], ታሪክን የሚያጎደፍ ፋሽስታዊ ድርጅት ['The fascist organisation that violates history'], 5.

60. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 86-8; Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 46-7. The term *Hebretesebawinet* is one in a lexicon of new words generated by the revolution. Cf. Tubiana, *La Révolution Éthiopienne*, 105-119 for an account of the impact of revolution on language.

61. *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.19, Ter 1 1967 E.C. [9 January 1975], የኢትዮጵያ ሶሻሊዝም ወይንስ ሳይንሳዊ ሶሻሊዝም ['Ethiopian socialism or scientific socialism'], 8-9

62. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

63. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ, 220; Zenebe Feleke, ነበር, 278-9.

64. Ironically, the term was historically used for military excursions into the imperial periphery. See Paulos Milkias, 'Zemecha: assessing the political and social foundations of mass education in Ethiopia', in *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol.15, no.3 (1980).

65. Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 240; Donham, *Marxist Modern*, ch.2; Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 26.

by its nationalisation of banks and insurance companies on 1 January 1975.<sup>66</sup> The Derg's celebrated Land Reform of February 1975 was largely based on a proposal submitted by Meison members.<sup>67</sup> The Land Reform not only proved "the most popular measure adopted by the government",<sup>68</sup> especially in the south of the country;<sup>69</sup> it also made the Derg the only military regime in Africa to institute social policies which truly revolutionised social and political arrangements.<sup>70</sup>

### ***(ii) Developing alliances and enmities***

Such experiences of shaping revolutionary regime policies persuaded Meison leaders that, in light of the challenges confronting the revolution, a temporary "marriage of convenience" could be entered with the Derg until these challenges were resolved.<sup>71</sup> "After the Land Reform," Negede Gobeze recalls, "the position we supported was accepted by Meison's leadership."<sup>72</sup> Although the new strategy was not made official until December 1975, Meison would henceforth offer the Derg 'critical support' [*hissawi*

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66. Alain Gascon and Michel Perret, 'Chronologie', in Joseph Tubiana (ed.), *La Révolution Éthiopienne Comme Phénomène de Société: Essais, Témoignages et Documents réunis par Joseph Tubiana* (L'Harmattan: Paris, 1990), 18.

67. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

68. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 101.

69. Cohen and Koehn, *Land Reform*, 5.

70. Cf. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 47-8.

71. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

72. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

*degaf*].<sup>73</sup> The alliance had implications for the civilian opposition as much as for Meison and the Derg.

For the EPRP, the military regime's radical reforms and its collaboration with Meison represented a significant challenge. With its anti-Derg polemics significantly weakened, the party decided to henceforth concentrate its protests on the the persistence of military rule and the lack of democratic rights as the issue "the regime had not, and was not likely to, resolve."<sup>74</sup> Macro-political positions and animosities that would play a decisive role in the subsequent Terror were thus becoming entrenched.

For the Derg, the alliance with Meison brought new legitimacy in the urban areas. It also provided the regime with a coherent ideological discourse and introduced efficient methods of political organisation and mobilisation. Within the Derg, Meison's support strengthened the faction of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which worked closely with the new ally and adopted its radical rhetoric.<sup>75</sup> Meison in turn was rewarded with considerable influence and several ministerial posts, although its offer of critical support proved to be a double-edged sword in the competition with its civilian rival: while giving the organisation "considerable propaganda advantages over the EPRP, it [suffered] from its identification with the Derg."<sup>76</sup>

The announcement of the alliance between the Derg and Meison in April 1976 coincided with the formation of the 'Provisional Office of Mass Organisational Affairs' (POMOA), charged with overseeing the government's ideological line and the

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73. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 16.

74. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 30.

75. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 26.

76. David Hamilton, *Ethiopia's Embattled Revolutionaries* (Institute for the Study of Conflict: London, 1977), 14.

politicisation and mobilisation of the population. Part of this effort was the establishment of the Yekatit '66 political school,<sup>77</sup> at which 300 to 400 students a month attended classes on Marxist theory.<sup>78</sup> POMOA, whose inception was not made public until April 1976, was formed in order to constitute a common political platform for revolutionary civilian organisations.<sup>79</sup> Five political groups were represented in POMOA, although the body was dominated by Meison in practice. Of the fifteen original commission members, seven were affiliated with Meison,<sup>80</sup> which viewed POMOA as an instrument to build its own grassroots support network.

Tutored by Meison's revolutionary intellectuals, the military regime was able to acquire and develop new discourses legitimising its political use of violence. The prime beneficiary of POMOA's work within the regime was its radical wing around Mengistu Haile Mariam, which had stood behind the November 1976 massacre.<sup>81</sup> And from its formation in April 1976, POMOA played a leading role in repressing dissent and opposition activities in places like Jimma and Wellega.<sup>82</sup> Concomitantly, however, POMOA also led new initiatives to engage with civilian opposition groups non-violently and to pursue a rapprochement.

Conciliatory efforts first manifested themselves in the December 1975 offer of an amnesty to the numerous students, many of them opposed to the Derg, who had

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77. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 130.

78. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 169.

79. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 53, 66.

80. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 54; cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 162.

81. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 77.

82. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 1-4; cf. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012: himself a Meison and POMOA member, Kassahun recalls that "in some places, for example Wellega, we suppressed the EPRP from the start."

deserted the *Zemecha*.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, unprecedented public debate and criticism of the regime was allowed to flourish as the government daily *Addis Zemen* opened its *Abyotawi Medrek* ['Revolutionary Forum'] section to EPRP contributors, who engaged in heated discussions with their Meison counterparts.<sup>84</sup> Debates in the quotidian paper centred on the core quarrel between the EPRP and POMOA's member organisations: whether anything short of 'unrestricted democracy' [*democrasia yale gedeb*] was a betrayal of the revolution - the EPRP's position - or whether the military regime should be temporarily supported as an ally.<sup>85</sup> For a few short months in early 1976 government newspapers became the most coveted publications in the capital, reportedly selling out within an hour and reselling second hand at 500 per cent of the original price.<sup>86</sup> The opening of the *Abyotawi Medrek* section was a concession that gave the EPRP an official outlet and strengthened its public image, but also let its contentions be openly deconstructed and rebutted. Such public engagement revealed the government's growing ideological confidence as much as its attempts to co-opt the remaining civilian opposition.<sup>87</sup>

POMOA's strategy of co-optation became further evident in the publication of the Programme of the 'National Democratic Revolution' on 20 April 1976.<sup>88</sup> This policy programme served as a "constitution" for the five civilian political organisations that

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83. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 157.

84. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 117, 123-7.

85. Compare 'The EPRP Program, August 1975 (Nehase 1967)' in the Library of Congress: Thomas L. Kane Collection: 'Pamphlet Collection: 1.ጽሑፍ'; *YSHD*, no.33, Tahsas 6 1968 E.C. [16 December 1975], 2-3, 5-6.

86. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 56-7.

87. Interview, Daniel Bekele, 2 March 2010.

88. For the text, see POMOA, *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977).

made up POMOA<sup>89</sup> and represented a "massive ideological shift" on the part of the regime,<sup>90</sup> advancing a class analysis of the Ethiopian situation and setting the Derg on the path of scientific socialism.<sup>91</sup> The programme invoked language understood by all participants to represent an offer of co-operation within the framework of POMOA to the EPRP.<sup>92</sup>

### *(iii) Contestation on the eve of the Terror*

The EPRP rejected the Programme of the National Democratic Revolution, arguing that it begged the decisive questions concerning the the status of the Derg and the shift to people's democracy.<sup>93</sup> This rejection intensified simmering political tensions in urban Ethiopia. If the Derg, following POMOA's advice, had hitherto pursued a dual strategy of repression and co-optation, the latter was now eclipsed. The following months were defined by the militarisation of contestants' positions and identities, and consequently by a re-definition of political space in the urban areas. The struggle for hearts and minds that had thus far played a role in debates such as *Addis Zemen's* 'Revolutionary Forum' gave way to a more assertive competition for political space at local and institutional levels. Activists on all sides came to expect, and began to prepare for, imminent confrontation. Throughout this process, diverse strata of social life were absorbed into

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89. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

90. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 163.

91. On the political calculations behind this shift, cf. Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts*, passim.

92. Interviews, Kiflu Tadesse, 19 July 2012 and Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

93. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 61-2.

the looming political conflict. This section examines how political space was claimed, contested and defined on the eve of the Terror, between April and September 1976. Inquiring into local as much as supralocal processes, it begins to move beyond the reach of the available secondary literature and therefore to rely more heavily on oral sources and participant memoirs.

The militarised contestation of political space in 1976 was felt across Addis Ababa. No neighbourhood of the capital remained unaffected by the claims of rival political groups and the mounting hostilities. Across the city, hundreds of young activists like Aklilu Kebede were turning Youth Associations into local centres of political activism and thereby at once politicising their surroundings and localising political identities, discourses and conflicts.

Yet some neighbourhoods in particular developed into primary arenas for mobilisation efforts and for opposition activities. One activist remembers the bustling Mercato as a "mysterious place with lots of safe houses for political dissidents and others hiding from the police",<sup>94</sup> where *Listros* ['shoeshine boys'] worked as lookouts and prostitutes could be hired as informants. As growing numbers of young activists went underground to work clandestinely, most of them retreated to the teeming and anonymising streets of Mercato, where days could be spent incognito in cinemas, brothels and cafés.<sup>95</sup> Gulele, also in the west of the capital, similarly became a centre of political activism and "a very fertile and active area for the EPRP".<sup>96</sup> Local residences were used as first arms deposits and as operational bases for party activities.<sup>97</sup>

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94. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 11.

95. Interviews, Mekonnen Getu, 13 April 2010 and Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

96. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

97. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012; cf. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 14-6.

Following the nationalisation of private residential properties in August 1975, the Derg had established new *Kebele* ['Urban Dweller'] associations to administer these new local assets.<sup>98</sup> Through their close association with the thriving Youth Associations,<sup>99</sup> however, the Kebeles soon turned into centres of political activism, and consequently of mobilisation and contestation. Until August 1976, both the EPRP and POMOA concentrated their efforts on the Kebele structures, seeking to garner grassroots support and competing for control of the emerging political space and institutional structures associated with the Kebeles.

Numerically at least, there is no doubt that the EPRP had the upper hand in this contest. Girma Bashe, a Meison member who later became Mengistu Haile Mariam's translator, concedes that the EPRP "had a complete sway in the urban parts of the country".<sup>100</sup> The Derg's Dawit Wolde Giorgis concurs, adding that the EPRP "had attracted many of the most educated and talented young Ethiopians."<sup>101</sup> Radical students had formed a first pillar of popularity for the EPRP:<sup>102</sup> "of course I joined the EPRP," one informant recalled; "because I joined the Student Movement, [and after the revolution] it was evident that you were either in Meison or in the EPRP".<sup>103</sup> But by 1976 the membership and support of political organisations extended far beyond the confines of former and current students. The merger with other clandestine political parties, many of which had particular ethnic or social strongholds, expanded grassroots

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98. Abera Yemane Ab, *The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution*, 92; Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 51.

99. Tesfu Kefyalew, 'Organisational structure', 52.

100. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

101. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 26.

102. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 34.

103. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

support for the larger political organisations.<sup>104</sup> Moreover at the local level, political activism had become a central feature of youth culture. Most young urban residents chose their political affiliations in line with dominant tendencies in their neighbourhoods and friendship circles, which more often than not implied association with the EPRP.<sup>105</sup>

The social expectation and mimetic diffusion of political activism was particularly evident in the copy-cat radicalism of younger siblings. One informant recalls his attempts at imitating his older brothers' political activism as a young teenager. Together with neighbourhood friends in the Sidist Kilo neighbourhood, he went to the extent of printing a clandestine revolutionary paper called *Qey Tadagi* ['Red Youth']. Political categories and affiliation, he remembers, were ubiquitous in his youth:

"At the time you couldn't escape it. [When] you go to school, you find it; when you go to your neighbourhood to play football, you find it. It is everywhere. So you have to be either this or that [either EPRP or Meison]; that was the attitude at that time."<sup>106</sup>

The route of young activists from politicisation to party membership typically occurred via intermediate stages. Local youths attended study circles, held clandestinely or at the Kebele's semi-legal Youth Associations, before being integrated into the EPRP's thriving Youth League.<sup>107</sup> The process afforded the party a measure of control over its membership base.

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104. The merger with the Gurage National Democratic Movement, better known by the name of its publication as *Amared* ['Get Armed'], led to widespread Gurage support for the EPRP. See Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 79; cf. Assafa Endeshaw, *Ethiopia: Perspectives for Renewal and Change* (Seng Lee Publishers: Singapore, 2002), 37.

105. Interviews, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011 and Solomon Kebede, 15 August 2012.

106. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

107. See for example Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*, 143.

To the politically minded and fashion-conscious youths, the EPRP offered a novel and enticing identity package, a way of being at once urban, modern and revolutionary. Several informants commented on the party's appealing iconography, drawn from the imagery and narratives of the classical revolutions, of Algeria and of Cuba.<sup>108</sup> To many, the EPRP appeared to be at the cutting edge of the socio-political changes in the country. The revolutionary collective identity it offered, underwritten by a strong sense of political urgency, augmented the timeliness of its demands to make the party the most attractive proposition on Addis Ababa's thriving market of political ideas and identities. Through this process the EPRP shaped a set of "highly inflammable" political identities<sup>109</sup> which were soon to become a central feature in the dynamics of the Ethiopian Terror.

While early revolutionary Ethiopia's political organisations routinely accused each other of narrow ethnic or class biases,<sup>110</sup> neither the EPRP's nor Meison's success in mobilising support was limited to particular ethnic, social or regional strongholds. These were truly pan-Ethiopian groups, whose spread constituted a nation-wide phenomenon, albeit centred in the intense politics of Addis Ababa. In cities and small towns across Ethiopia, youths became politically active, mostly joining local EPRP structures.<sup>111</sup>

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108. Interviews, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012; Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012; Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012; Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

109. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (Penguin: New York, 2006), xv.

110. See for example *Amez* ['Rebel!', Mouthpiece of the EPRA], Vol.2, No.2, ( 20 Tikimt 1970 E.C. [30 October 1977]); Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *Ethiopia in Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977), 45.

111. See for example Abdu Muhammad, 'A history of Dase town, 1941-1991', MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University (1997), 82; Damtie Asfaw, 'Peasant conditions in Dambiya (Semen Gondar), 1974-1991', MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University (2005).

In adopting to varying local circumstances and cultural practices, activists displayed a remarkable degree of versatility and dexterity. In Addis Ababa it was thus common to disguise political meetings as prayer vigils, adopting common Christian practice in the city;<sup>112</sup> similarly, underground activists spent days in overflowing hospital waiting rooms,<sup>113</sup> exploiting the distinct anonymity and relative security unique to this urban setting.

The popularity and rapid growth that ensued from the EPRP's strategies and appeal proved to be a mixed blessing for the organisation. The swift increase in membership, coupled with the degree and visibility of its activism, projected the image of a party stronger and more powerful than the EPRP actually was, itself an ambiguous condition. More disquieting was the fact that rapid growth lowered recruitment standards, resulting in a larger but less well-trained and committed membership.<sup>114</sup>

One of the strengths of the EPRP, as it established itself in Addis Ababa during the first two years after the revolution, had been the subversive fervour and uncompromising commitment of its members. Many activists carried potassium cyanide capsules so as to be able to commit suicide and escape torture if captured.<sup>115</sup> For numerous members, such willingness to sacrifice for the struggle was not merely passive: one informant describes the disposition of many when he recalls that "we were ready to die for what we believed in. [...] Everybody was ready to die and also [...] to

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112. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012; see also Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 25.

113. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

114. Interview, Solomon Kebede, 15 August 2012.

115. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 43. According to Damtie Asfaw, some militants in the countryside, without access to potassium cyanide, made their own versions by filling tetracycline capsules with rat poison: Damtie Asfaw, 'Peasant conditions in Dambiya', 107.

kill for the revolution."<sup>116</sup> The extent to which later recruits shared such readiness to pursue ends by any means necessary, which became an important factor in the urban Terror, appears questionable.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly debilitating was the fact that whereas the EPRP's old guard was truly underground, consisting of a membership unknown to its surroundings, many new members were easily identified as such within their local communities. Their days were spent at Youth Associations,<sup>118</sup> their political activities were carried out openly and in many cases young activists even changed their vocabulary to reflect the EPRP's usage of political terms and thereby to broadcast their new identity.<sup>119</sup> The visibility of political affiliations and identities at the local level constituted an important feature of this period of contestation of political space. The local knowledge this generated would assume an important role as the Terror unfolded, forming the basis of denouncement and hence of later selective violence.

As the EPRP enjoyed growing popular support and success in Addis Ababa, its strategy began to alter. The party's emphasis shifted away from a Maoist centrality of rural insurgency, and towards urban guerrilla activities. Whereas the party had from its foundation insisted on the primacy of the rural struggle, most of its leadership now resided in the capital and was preoccupied primarily with urban affairs. By 1976, prominent members such as Tesfaye Debessai, Berhane Meskel and Aklilu Hiruy, who

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116. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

117. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

118. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 68.

119. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011. Differences in language registers often centred on new political slogans and terms. For example, EPRP members commonly closed letters and meetings with the word *Enachenfallen* ['We shall win'], whereas regime supporters tended to use term *Enashenfallen*. Similarly, EPRP members rejected the official new term for 'worker', *Wozader*, preferring the term *Labader* instead. Cf. Alem Mezgebe, 'Ethiopia - the deadly game', in Joseph Tubiana, *La Révolution Éthiopienne*, 162; Ottaways, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 138.

had returned from their European exiles with the intention of joining the guerilla base at Assimba, led the struggle in and from Addis Ababa instead.<sup>120</sup> This gradual shift would soon climax in the official adoption of urban guerrilla tactics, a decision which was to divide the party and to define Ethiopia's urban Terror.

The unfolding fight over urban support and control was waged and shaped at the local level as much as by the senior decision makers of the dominant political groups. The changing political landscape of new administrative structures, revolutionary organisations and narrative frameworks was inhabited and appropriated by local actors pursuing their own interests, which were rarely determined by or even entirely congruent with the dictates of the emerging master cleavage. Even before the sustained onset of collective violence, revolutionary Ethiopia's urban conflicts were hence aggregately produced by supra-local and local actors.

A violent escalation of these conflicts was expected by all sides. The 1976 May Day demonstrations confirmed such expectations. As in the previous year, May Day rallies had become a setting for open expressions of dissent and shows of popular support. Yet even more than in the previous year, such open defiance and claim on urban space by the clandestine opposition met with violent repression by regime soldiers.<sup>121</sup> An American Peace Corps volunteer's diary succinctly summarises the 1976 May Day scenes in Addis Ababa: "there was a student demonstration this morning, but the students were dispersed by gun-fire. Truckloads of soldiers, soldiers on buildings, jeeps with mounted machine guns everywhere."<sup>122</sup> Such violent displays of force became the

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120. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

121. For 1975, see Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 119; for 1976, see Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 43.

122. Henry Klein, *Through Ferrengi Eyes: The Diary of a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia, 1974-1976* (Exposition Press: Hicksville, 1979), 200.

Derg's preferred response to dissent; the EPRP, in turn, was beginning to arm its supporters in anticipation of violent confrontation. In the following years, the pattern of adventurous defiance and ruthless repression was to be repeated across the capital.

### **The onset of the Terror**

The transition from mere contestation of political space to violent confrontation, and hence to the first phase of the Terror, occurred in September 1976. Early in the month, armed EPRP squads staged two successful high-profile robberies. The first targeted the Police Officers Training Centre in Sendafa, 25 miles east of Addis Ababa, and absconded with more than a hundred automatic rifles, besides other weapons and ammunitions.<sup>123</sup> The second attack, on a bank in the capital, eased the group's financial difficulties by appropriating 1.2 million Birr.<sup>124</sup> Both assaults were facilitated by EPRP members working at the targeted institutions. Combined with a string of sabotage acts ascribed to the party, they established the EPRP as an existential threat to the Derg's control over the capital.

Following Ethiopian New Year's Day and the second anniversary of the Emperor's overthrow, the Derg launched a multi-faceted campaign against the civilian opposition, targeting particularly the EPRP. Government newspapers published almost daily front-page articles denouncing the party and warning that "youngsters should not confuse the

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123. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

124. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 154, 156.

masses by echoing the slogans of the so-called EPRP".<sup>125</sup> The consequence of opposing the regime, they threatened, would be "revolutionary justice on the spot".<sup>126</sup> These were no empty threats: in the following weeks, hundreds of suspected EPRP activists were rounded up in raids across the city, and sporadic reports about executions at several prisons began to circulate.<sup>127</sup> The EPRP took this campaign as its cue to launch its own strategy of "offensive defense", targeting regime members and collaborators for assassination. Ethiopia's urban Terror had begun.

***(i) Causes and culpabilities***

In light of sustained discussions over the causes and culpabilities of the Terror's onset, these ought to be briefly addressed before the dynamics and effects of the Terror's first phase are examined. Debates over who fired the Terror's first shot have been held for several decades, periodically intensifying whenever accounts of the period have been published.<sup>128</sup> Like other debates surrounding the Terror, questions concerning its onset have been coloured and complicated by participants' remaining personal stakes in particular narratives, and by the discourses of culpability and victimisation that these narratives imply or negate.

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125. *Ethiopian Herald*, 17 September 1976, 'PMAC condemns so-called EPRP'.

126. *Ethiopian Herald*, 22 September 1976, 'Revolutionary Justice Awaits Plotters: Government Warns Anarchist Elements'.

127. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 133-6.

128. Most recently following the publication of Gebru Tareke's blunt interpretation in 2012: Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian revolution'.

On one side of these debates are those who understand the Derg's repression of the civilian opposition as a response to the latter's increasingly violent tactics. Thus Gebru Tareke describes the repression as the return of a "boomerang" that came full circle to hit the EPRP.<sup>129</sup> Halliday and Molyneux find it "an inescapable conclusion" that, however prone the regime may have been to having recourse to violent means, "it was the EPRP's terrorist policies that encouraged the new phase of PMAC repression".<sup>130</sup> The Ottaways concur, suggesting that the Derg stepped up its repression in response to an EPRP attempt to assassinate Mengistu Haile Mariam.<sup>131</sup> Such arguments view the EPRP's assassination campaign against prominent regime members as the beginning of collective violence in Addis Ababa.

The chronology of events, however, requires such arguments to be substantially qualified. The Derg's repression preceded the launch of the EPRP's systematic assassinations. State repression was triggered not by the civilian opposition's targeted killings but rather by its growing popularity and intrepidity. The official condemnation and repression of the EPRP, far from being an impetuous response to violent confrontation, had been proposed by Mengistu Haile Mariam weeks earlier, and had been decided on by his supporters within the regime despite internal objections, voiced by Meison among others.<sup>132</sup> Claims that the regime acted merely in response to provocation are hence problematic, and tenable only with reference to the EPRP's militarisation, activism and popularity, not its assassination campaign.

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129. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian revolution', 46.

130. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 122

131. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 127; for similar positions, see also Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጩ ረጅም ጉዞ, 366; Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 199.

132. Interviews, Negede Gobeze and Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

Furthermore, it needs to be emphasised that the repression of the EPRP did not constitute a uniform policy supported by the entire Derg, but rather the initiative of a radical faction within it. Andargachew Tiruneh is right in observing that the implementation of violent repression was the result of multiple sovereignty within the regime.<sup>133</sup> The fact that the official media began denouncing the EPRP by name at the same time as POMOA's organ, *Abyotawit Ityopia* ['Revolutionary Ethiopia'], and further that it employed the same language in these denunciations,<sup>134</sup> supports Andargachew Tiruneh's reading. The lack of a uniform perspective on the EPRP's activities indicates that the violent response they met was no inevitability.

On the other side of the debate over the onset of the Terror are those who seek to depict the EPRP's assassinations as a necessary or at least legitimate response to state repression.<sup>135</sup> The EPRP's violence, in these accounts, was defensive and responsive. Unqualified, such arguments for a merely reactive opposition are similarly doubtful. The EPRP had already decided to adopt its strategy of targeted assassinations, internally referred to as "offensive defense", at a leadership plenum in August.<sup>136</sup> Its implementation had been deferred for a month following objections from Central Committee members Getatchew Maru and Berhane Meskel Redda, objections which were soon to mature into a profound split in the party. Moreover, it has since emerged

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133. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 185.

134. *Abyotawit Ityopia*, vol.1, no.10, Meskerem 15 1969 E.C. [25 September 1976]: 'አዋር መንገደኛ፤ ረጅም መንገደኛ።'.

135. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*; Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 185.

136. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 133-6. Himself an EPRP leader, Kiflu adds some revealing comments to his account of how the decision to adopt the new strategy was reached: "History, usually governed by social, political and economic laws, can also be affected by the role that individuals play. In the Ethiopian case, Mengistu's role was considered detrimental to the struggle at large and to the EPRP in particular. Leading EPRP members considered it imperative to eliminate him."

that the EPRP had already sanctioned a number of assassinations before September 1976, most notably against Mesfin Kassu and Colonel Teka Tulu. These early attempts failed, the latter after the assassination squad was suspected by local residents and chased away by a stone-throwing mob.<sup>137</sup> The EPRP's revolutionary terror campaign cannot therefore be reduced to a defensive strategy developed in response to state repression in September 1976.

The historian Bahru Zewde has proposed a third perspective on the onset of the Terror. In light of the preceding bilateral build-up of arms and tension, Bahru contends, ascriptions of unilateral responsibility and causation are futile. Instead, the onset of the Terror needs to be understood as the culmination of hostilities which had matured and militarised over the preceding months.<sup>138</sup> This argument proposes an important change of emphasis in debates over the beginning of collective violence in Addis Ababa, moving discussion away from common accusations and justifications and towards an appreciation of violence as process rather than as mere event.

Despite these strengths, however, Bahru's argument does eschew explanation regarding the precise process by which growing tensions did result in the onset of collective violence, and hence avoids a question that does lie within the territory of the historian. Here, the common arguments focusing on central decision making within either the Derg or the EPRP do provide an important corrective. Whilst there is no doubt that tensions between political organisations, both at the central and at the local level, had been escalating throughout 1976, it was the parallel decisions of Derg and EPRP leaders in August 1976 to introduce new levels of violent confrontation that

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137. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 156-7 The incident indicates a lack of local support for the EPRP's recourse to violent means.

138. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 25.

triggered the onset of collective violence. In doing so, they established the normative social and narrative contexts within which decentralised and local decisions to act violently were carried out. For while the dynamics of the Terror were deeply rooted in local relations and conflicts, the origins of collective violence were external to local communities.<sup>139</sup> The Terror was triggered by parallel and yet symbiotic decisions to invoke revolutionary legitimacy for terror campaigns, made by both the regime's politburo and the EPRP's plenum.

Once such violence emerged, however, its trajectory did not simply run along the grain of the conflict's supposed master cleavage, pitting the EPRP and associated groups on the one hand against the regime and its civilian allies on the other. It also caused discord within opposing groups and triggered a flurry of local conflicts.

***(ii) Shaping an atrocity environment: the EPRP's assassination campaign***

The EPRP's assassination campaign, now commonly remembered by the problematic epithet of 'White Terror', has never received the attention pertinent to its role in Ethiopia's urban violence. In the post-Derg Red Terror trials, the Special Prosecutor's Office chose not to prosecute its violent acts.<sup>140</sup> The 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum' in Addis Ababa, meanwhile, entirely disregards its existence. One informant's assertion that "nobody speaks about it nowadays"<sup>141</sup> is hence not entirely

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139. This finding is congruent with arguments advanced in Kalyvas, *Ontology*, 485.

140. Interview, Special Prosecutor Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

141. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

hyperbolic.<sup>142</sup> Yet without an appreciation of the EPRP's assassination campaign, and of its effects on those who had reason to see themselves as its potential targets, the history of the Ethiopian Terror cannot be rightly understood.

In August 1976, the EPRP's leadership was informed by Moges Wolde Mikael, a senior Derg member who sympathised with the party, that Mengistu Haile Mariam was about to move from the Fourth Division Headquarters to the former palace, where he would be difficult to track. The EPRP regarded Mengistu, who led the Derg's radical faction, as the most dangerous opponent of the party. At a central committee meeting, a proposition to "eliminate" the vice-chairman was narrowly agreed on in a rare vote.<sup>143</sup> The decision marked the onset of the EPRP's strategy of 'offensive defense'. Since the decision was vehemently opposed by two leading members, Berhane Meskel and Getatchew Maru, it also marked the emergence of a deepening rift within the party.

In the event, this first high-profile assassination attempt failed; on 23 September 1976, Mengistu Haile Mariam narrowly escaped an ambush on his Land Rover in the vicinity of the Stadium.<sup>144</sup> In the following weeks, however, EPRP assassinations began to succeed and to multiply.

The first high profile casualty was Fikre Merid, who was a POMOA member, among the most eminent Meison<sup>145</sup> leaders and "widely regarded as [Meison's] leading

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142. The EPRP's assassination campaign does, however, feature prominently in Meison-associated narratives of the period, and has been cast as the defining trigger by some academics, most notably Gebru Tareke and the Ottaways.

143. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 133-6.

144. Bahru Zewde, 'The History of the Red Terror', 26; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 154-5. Several sources, including the British Foreign Office, wrongly assume this assassination attempt to have been the work of "dissident army personnel": FCO 31/2257-5, Embassy Report on the EPRP, January 1978. The same mistaken assumption is found in Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 120.

145. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 169.

theoretician".<sup>146</sup> The son of Merid Mengesha, Haile Selassie's Minister of Defence, Fikre Merid was esteemed among Meison members as "a very soft-spoken, likeable character"<sup>147</sup> and as an engaging educator. On 1 October 1976, he was attacked in public and shot in front of his wife by an EPRP squad,<sup>148</sup> which, according to my informants, included both a disgruntled former Meison member and a future senior EPRDF diplomat.<sup>149</sup> Ominously, the squad had which acted spontaneously, without guidance or authorisation from the party's central committee.<sup>150</sup>

A few days later, Gebre Igziabeher Hagos, the leader of Meison's Youth League, was killed by snipers.<sup>151</sup> In the following weeks, nine of the fifteen original senior POMOA members were murdered,<sup>152</sup> a tally that rose swiftly to comprise at least fifty high-profile government supporters by March 1977.<sup>153</sup> For those who constituted the EPRP's likely or even declared targets, the assassination campaign transformed not only daily life but also perceptions of Ethiopia's revolutionary situation. The experience and exercise of violence began to become normalised aspects of the urban everyday. The daily life of a Meison activist during this period illustrates this process.

Yeraswork Admassie joined Meison in the months following the 1974 Revolution, having been previously radicalised as a student in Sweden.<sup>154</sup> In 1976 he was "told to

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146. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 117, 122-3.

147. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

148. *Ethiopian Herald*, 2 October 1976, 'Fikre Merid Killed Here by Anarchists'.

149. Interviews, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011 and Kebere Assefa, 24 August 2012.

150. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 157.

151. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

152. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 171.

153. Amnesty International, Afr. 25/01/77, March 1977.

154. The following account is based on interviews with Yeraswork Admassie, 20 and 26 September 2011.

return" to Addis Ababa, where he was set to work as a legal advisor and to teach at the newly established Yekatit '66 political school. Yet on 27 October 1976, a mere ten days after his arrival, the school became the target of a bomb attack by the EPRP, in which several cadres were killed and much of the school was destroyed.<sup>155</sup> Yeraswork survived the attack but spent the following three months in hospital, thus assuming his teaching position only in January 1977.

The months following his release from hospital marked the climax of the EPRP's assassination campaign. As a senior Meison member and an instructor at the political school, Yeraswork had good reason to expect becoming its target. He recalls the constant alertness and fear that defined his life and that of his comrades during those months. Few people could be trusted; he would suspect even police officers of being covert EPRP members. To visit his father, who lived to the east of his residence and workplace in the vicinity of the British Embassy, Yeraswork would first drive southwest to the sprawling Mercato, seeking to shake off any potential pursuers. At home, he ascended the stairs to his flat with a Kalashnikov held ready under his coat, prepared to encounter assassins waiting for him at any point. Similarly, he kept a pistol on his lap when driving, and whenever possible drove in a convoy with comrades so that they could watch each other's back.

Yeraswork's experience is representative of that of many who deemed themselves potential targets of the EPRP's urban terror campaign. Negede Gobeze recalls never sleeping at the same place for subsequent nights.<sup>156</sup> Kassahun Berhanu remembers the unabating expectation of being attacked, and his constant readiness to defend

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155. *Ethiopian Herald*, 28 October 1976, 'Political School targeted by anarchists'.

156. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

himself.<sup>157</sup> For those associated with the regime or its civilian allies, everyday life in the shadow of the EPRP's assassinations was marked by severe angst. Perceptions of an atrocity environment proliferated, constituting the context within which the escalation of the Terror needs to be understood.

Critically, the EPRP's assassination campaign was not targeted merely at the higher echelons of the regime and its civilian allies. If the EPRP central committee's decision to "eliminate those who perpetuate violence on the people" may have suggested a narrow and supralocal scope for the campaign's targets,<sup>158</sup> the editions of *Democrasia* that conveyed the beginning of the new lethal strategy to the EPRP base and to the public indicated and threatened a broader pool of targets. Once the EPRP's urban terror campaign unfolded, it enveloped the local realm as much as the supralocal. It claimed the lives of ordinary citizens as well as those of regime workers. To understand how this process occurred, the development of the EPRP's urban armed wing needs to be considered in greater detail.

The EPRP's assassinations were carried out by its 'urban defense squads', whose formation was announced by *Democrasia* in July 1976.<sup>159</sup> These squads, consisting of core EPRP members that had been given rudimentary military training, were in charge of all of the party's militia operation, ranging from the protection of members and party meetings over the raiding of police stations, factories and communication facilities to the tracking and killing of selected opponents of the party.<sup>160</sup> Founded as early as 1974, these urban defense squads initially consisted of no more than thirty trained activists

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157. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

158. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 139-40.

159. *Democrasia*, vol.3, no.11, July 1976.

160. FBIS-SSA-77-191, 'Commentary scores 'bourgeois' anti-Ethiopian propaganda' (3 October 1977).

that were given the triple mandate of obtaining arms, acquiring funds and defending EPRP members and property.

In July 1976, the squads expanded and professionalised their practices when soldiers associated with Sisay Habte Wold's purported coup attempt joined the urban EPRP with their weapons. With the onset of the party's assassination campaign in September 1976, the squads increased both in constituent numbers and in importance.<sup>161</sup> These changes were formalised in December 1976, when the EPRP's leadership decided to expand the 'urban defense squads' from a handful of militants to a ubiquitous feature of the party's organisational structure. Squads were now assigned to each zonal committee as well as to the Youth League and the Labour Association, as their numbers swelled to about 450 activists.<sup>162</sup>

Reforms to the units and organisational role of the EPRP's urban armed wing implied a significant shift in control over the party's use and means of violence. Until December 1976, the party's central committee retained significant command over members' armed operations, reserving the right to sanction or veto proposed targets.<sup>163</sup> Following the restructuring of the urban defense squads' structure, however, these rights were devolved to the Addis Ababa Inter-Zonal committee and to the zonal committees in the regions outside the capital,<sup>164</sup> structures which were soon to disintegrate under the pressure of the regime's terror. If the urban defense squads had already evidenced a propensity towards autonomy in the impromptu assassination of Fikre Merid, this

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161. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

162. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 148-53, 284.

163. Although the assassination of Fikre Merid illustrates the limits of such centralised oversight.

164. These rights were devolved with the proviso that the relevant committees were to check potential targets with the party's military commission in order to prevent the killing of EPRP sympathisers and infiltrators. Cf. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 152.

tendency was further accentuated as the structures charged with supervising the armed groups began to falter.

The process is illustrated by the evolution of the squads' practice of sending warning messages to prospective targets. One informant, who was involved in the activity of sending these messages, recalls the practice:

"We gave the 'bad guys' a warning, a paper warning. First, second and third warning. 'You have become anti-people. If you don't [change course], if you are against the people, we will take measure against you.' After the third [warning], there would be a major attack."<sup>165</sup>

Who received such messages was meant to be vetted by the party's responsible committee. Within the EPRP's strategy, these warnings - which could also take the form of publishing collaborator's names in underground journals, cautioning them through friends or family members and writing graffiti on their walls - were designed "to deter people from assisting the regime",<sup>166</sup> indicating the ease with which the logic of terror was institutionalised within the party's bureaucracy. Yet within months, these warning messages were issued without any centralised oversight, and applied the narrative of deterrence to increasingly local targets.

Kebere Assefa, who was a Meison member, recalls receiving such a warning message delivered by his own cousin, who had joined a local EPRP cell. The warning consisted of a burnt copy of *Tegelachen* - the organ of the Ethiopian Student Movement in Europe, which was dominated by Meison - and a note stating that "you and your

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165. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

166. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 157-8.

*banda*<sup>167</sup> friends will be burnt like this by forces of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army."<sup>168</sup> With a violence-legitimising discourse in place and without effective supervision, control over the EPRP's methods and structures of violence became localised and decentralised.

Much like the regime's own unfolding violence, the EPRP's assassination campaign was driven by a logic of depersonalisation. Victims of its violence were cast in one-dimensional terms as "elements" to be "eliminated". In both cases, "the people" gradually ceased to be a concrete reality to be engaged and instead became a violence-justifying rhetorical figure,<sup>169</sup> while concomitantly the process of casting "counter-revolutionaries" turned fellow citizens into dangerous opponents of the collective revolutionary struggle that can and even ought to be killed.

The scope and impact of the EPRP's assassination campaign gave the impression of a significantly more powerful group than the party in fact was. Rumours and narratives about its violence amplified the effects of the killings themselves, instilling fear and projecting an image of the party's power exceeding its actual capacity.<sup>170</sup> Both supporters of the party and government members believed and acted upon this projected image. Among the former, it fuelled the levels of enthusiasm and adventurism that both defined and jeopardised the party's activism. Among the latter, it caused the paranoia and perceptions of a state of siege that fanned the regime's own developing organised violence.

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167. The term *banda* referred to Ethiopians that collaborated with the colonial forces during the Italian occupation, and by extension to those acting against the national interest.

168. Interview, Kebere Assefa, 24 August 2012.

169. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 19.

170. For a comparative discussion of this common conflict dynamic, cf. Richard Reid. *War in Pre-Colonial East Africa: the Patterns and Meanings of State-Level Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (James Currey: Oxford, 2007), 217.

In the closing months of 1976, the EPRP's assassination campaign became a dominant feature of life in Addis Ababa. At least until early 1977, Brietzke's claim that the Derg treated the ascendant EPRP "as a more significant threat to military rule than [...] the Eritrean separatists"<sup>171</sup> is justifiable. The government's sovereignty was challenged at the political centre, as scores of its members and supporters were assassinated publicly. The police feared patrolling certain neighbourhoods due to EPRP defense squad activities,<sup>172</sup> as the regime's control over the capital became increasingly fragile. This sense of vulnerability and weakness provides a significant background to the development of the regime's own campaigns of revolutionary terror.

***(iii) "Anti-people elements shall be liquidated": emerging state terror***

During the first phase of the Terror, the military regime found itself on the defensive. In the urban conflict with the EPRP, its measures were primarily reactive. The foundations of its power were fragile at best, facilitating the success of the urban opposition's audacious challenge in the closing months of 1976. This weakness of the early Derg is often forgotten in light of later developments. As a result, the EPRP's urban guerilla strategy has been portrayed as having been doomed from the outset, given the naive adventurism of many party members, the scarce success rate of such insurgent tactics globally and the Derg's superior power.<sup>173</sup> John Markakis has sounded a salutary note of

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171. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 169.

172. Dereje Workayehu, 'A history of police and policing in Addis Ababa under the Derg regime, 1974-1991', MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University (2009), 65.

173. See for example Assafa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for renewal*, 38.

caution by insisting that, during the early days of the urban Terror in 1976, "the military regime was tottering" and the urban guerilla strategy thus appeared promising to many.<sup>174</sup> Andargachew Tiruneh describes the perception of many urban activists when he writes that by mid-1976, the EPRP "looked poised to oust the Derg from power."<sup>175</sup>

Within its territory, the Derg was facing a protracted war in Eritrea; escalating insurrections had sprung up in Tigray, Gonder, Gojjam and Bale; and in the Ogaden Somali irredentist rebellions were broadening into a looming war with heavily-armed Somalia. As René Lefort observes, "from every direction except Kenya, Addis Ababa heard the sound of marching soldiers."<sup>176</sup> Ethiopia's emerging state terror hence needs to be understood in the context of a weak regime vying to preserve itself in the face of organised and violent insurgency.<sup>177</sup>

Yet if the Derg was on the defensive during the first phase of the Terror, it was certainly not passive. Rather, it combined a haphazard policy of denunciation, detention and sporadic executions of suspected militants with efforts to lay the foundations of a more systematic response to the urban challenge. Beginning on Ethiopian New Year's Day, 12 September 1976, the Derg launched its comprehensive media assault on "the so-called EPRP and its reactionary allies". Declaring that any such opposition "will be crushed by the broad masses",<sup>178</sup> the Derg began to detain growing numbers of assumed opponents. When Fikre Merid was assassinated on 1 October 1976, confirming the EPRP's capability to carry out its strategy of targeted assassinations, the regime

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174. John Markakis. 'Garrison socialism: the case of Ethiopia', in *MERIP Reports*, vol. 79 (1979), 14.

175. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 175.

176. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 192.

177. Cf. Mazower, 'Violence and the state', 1177-8.

178. *Ethiopian Herald*, 13 September 1976, 'PMAC Issues Warning: Subversive Activities of Anarchists Exposed'

responded by declaring its infamous 'exchange rate': "for every revolutionary killed," it was broadcast in the de-personalising language that defined conceptualisations of violence during the Terror, "one thousand anti-people elements shall be liquidated."<sup>179</sup>

In the following months, the Derg published a list of eight hundred known or suspected regime opponents, whose pictures and names were plastered on walls across the city to encourage denunciations by the public. The list revealed the limits of the regime's local information during the early stages of the Terror,<sup>180</sup> but it also forced a further layer of opposition activists permanently underground.<sup>181</sup>

The climax of state violence during the first phase of the Terror consisted of sporadic executions of detainees. These occurred throughout this period, marking a consequential step in the transition from a semblance of legal process to the unabashedly extrajudicial killing of regime opponents.<sup>182</sup> The transitional features of the first phase of the Terror are evidenced by the nature of these executions: while state actors began to routinise extrajudicial executions of regime opponents, this phase also witnessed the last killings of political prisoners that were still ordered by court martial.<sup>183</sup>

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179. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 26.

180. Not only did the list lack many prominent opposition figures whilst including minor ones, it also included suspects who weren't opposition activists at all. For example, Dawit Terefe was listed, albeit with his name misspelled, after he suddenly abandoned a teaching position and was denounced as a potential counter-revolutionary by the school at which he had taught. Cf. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

181. For instance, Mulugeta Zena, an EPRP member who had previously been active in the student movement and was locally renowned for his black belt in Karate, had been able to eschew clandestine life until the list with his picture and name was published. Cf. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 29 March 2012.

182. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 186-96.

183. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 186.

Similarly indicative of this first phase's transitional character was the fact that the military regime still felt the need to issue public apologies for at least major uses of violence. It named its victims and provided outlines of their alleged crimes. For instance, on 2 November 1976 twenty-three youths were executed in the capital, twenty-one of whom "belonged to the anarchist group calling itself the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party".<sup>184</sup> The regime's statement, which was publicised on the front pages of government newspapers, insisted that the case against these enemies of the state had been "thoroughly investigated, and [that] various evidences were produced to prove the charges of murders, robberies and anti-revolutionary crimes".<sup>185</sup> Likewise, on 18 November 1976 the Derg announced the execution of a further twenty-seven alleged counter-revolutionaries, whose fate had been sealed "by the first criminal bench of the Special Court Martial" and confirmed by the Head of State, Tafari Bante.<sup>186</sup> In the case of both executions, the regime felt the need to name its victims and to justify its actions at length. Soon, the exercise of state violence would elicit no such public explanations.

One senior EPRP leader, writing under the the alias of Babile Tola, has claimed that the difference between this early repression by the Derg and its later climax in the officially proclaimed Red Terror was merely quantitative.<sup>187</sup> In at least one important regard, then, he is mistaken. In contrast to both the decentralised violence of the Terror's second phase and the unapologetic, undeclared and unexplained executions of the final phase, the Derg's violence in late 1976 and early 1977 still elicited lengthy public

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184. *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 November 1976, 'For Murder, Counter-Revolutionary Crimes: Twenty-Three Anarchists Executed'.

185. *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 November 1976, 'For Murder, Counter-Revolutionary Crimes: Twenty-Three Anarchists Executed'.

186. *Ethiopian Herald*, 19 November 1976, 'PMAC Announces Execution of 27 for Acts Inimical to Revolution'.

187. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 69.

accounts and justifications. The logic of violence had not yet become internalised, its practice not yet normalised. The mode of violence, not merely its extent, was to change as the Terror unfolded.

Significantly, the regime's activities in the first phase of the Terror were not restricted to its inchoate policy of detention and execution. It also laid the foundations for a more rigorous and systematic response to the civilian urban challenge. This consisted in the formation of new institutional structures and practices, which came to play important roles in the unfolding Terror. Most significant were changes to the roles of the Kebeles, the formation of *Abyot Tebeka* ['revolution defense'] squads, the instrumentalisation of the infamous *Nebelbal* elite military unit, and the introduction of regular systematic search campaigns.

The Kebele structure that the Derg had introduced in July 1975 afforded the regime a degree of control over urban society unparalleled in Africa.<sup>188</sup> Households were numbered and closely surveyed by local government structures. In order to sharpen these tools of control and to stifle the opposition at the local level, the powers invested in these Kebele structures were vastly expanded in October 1976.<sup>189</sup> This expansion of Kebele powers entailed a first devolution of government control to local actors. How this power was used varied significantly over space and time.

In their early stages, Kebeles often elected respected community leaders to office. For instance in Kefteгна 09 in Gulele, which was soon to become infamous for the violent excesses of its leaders Kelbessa Negewo and Samrat Mamo, the first elected chairman was Temesgen Wakjira, a reputable family man. Temesgen was not a man

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188. Thomas Ofcansky and LaVerle Berry (eds.), *Ethiopia: A Country Study* (GPO: Washington, 1991), 230

189. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 55; see also Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 171-2.

looking for a career in revolutionary politics. As tensions within his administration grew and an increasing number of local youths were drawn into the developing conflict, Temesgen could be seen walking through the neighbourhood knocking on doors, warning parents of the dangers faced by their children and pleading with them to keep their offspring out of trouble.<sup>190</sup> The early Kebeles also accommodated a vast range of local diversity and practice; Launhardt reports that some Kebeles opened meetings in prayer after Evangelical residents had been elected to office.<sup>191</sup>

Yet few Kebeles remained the domain of concerned neighbourhood elders like Temesgen or of openly practicing Evangelicals for long. The October 1976 expansion of the Kebeles' mandate generated a new set of local leaders, reflecting the local administrations' new powers: Kebeles were now able to supervise schools, to curtail black markets and, crucially after the onset of the Terror, to control 'counter-revolutionary' activities.<sup>192</sup> The Kebeles' Youth Associations, which had hitherto been run by returnees from the Zemecha and were in most neighbourhoods dominated by sympathisers of the EPRP, were banned.<sup>193</sup> With the reforms came the enforcement of at least a modicum of Marxist orthodoxy. In several neighbourhoods, including Gulele, youths were required to attend Marxist study groups each Friday, meetings designed to recruit and to gauge political positions<sup>194</sup> and paralleling practice in government offices.<sup>195</sup>

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190. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

191. Johannes Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919-1991), with special reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod* (Lit: Münster, 2004), 241.

192. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 55; see also Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 171-2.

193. Tesfu Kefyalew, 'Organisational structure', 51-2.

194. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011. Meetings such as these turned the Kebeles into sites of identity negotiation, where local dynamics symbiotically merged with the developing master cleavage.

195. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

The local changes effected by the October 1976 Kebele reforms were profound. In Keftegna 09, hostility grew between chairman Temesgen Wakjira and the young militant Kelbessa Negewo, who had a radically different vision of how to run and appropriate the new Kebele structure. Temesgen's flight following an assassination plot against him marked the beginning of Kelbessa's violent control over Keftegna 09,<sup>196</sup> a rule defined by significant local autonomy and yet based on the regime's narrative framework and allocation of resources.<sup>197</sup> For the Derg, such local autonomy was a desirable state of affairs worth sustaining as long as the decentralised powers were wielded in line with government interests, such as the dissemination of its legitimising discourse and the weakening of the radical opposition. Renewed Kebele elections were held a mere week after the October reforms, ensuring that the newly empowered local Associations were staffed with leaders deemed loyal to the regime.<sup>198</sup>

The transformation of the Kebeles into local institutions of counter-insurgency was augmented by the concomitant formation of the pervasive *Abyot Tebeka* ['Revolution Defense'] squads. These were local militias attached to each Kebele, many government offices and even state-owned businesses.<sup>199</sup> According to the government press, calls for the establishment of such squads emerged from the public following the sharp increase in the activity of the EPRP's urban defense squads.<sup>200</sup> On this reading, the *Abyot Tebeka* were established to prevent the formation of vigilante groups. More likely, these squads were founded to spearhead the regime's intended offensive against

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196. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

197. Abbink, 'The impact of violence', 136-7.

198. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

199. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 209.

200. *Addis Zemen*, 24 Hedar 1969 E.C. [3 December 1976].

its urban challengers.<sup>201</sup> Once established, the *Abyot Tebeka* squads became integral to the dynamics of the Terror's violence; like the newly empowered Kebeles of which they became a defining feature, they were part of the groundwork laid by the Derg during the first phase of the Terror.

Less prominent yet no less feared were the *Nebelbal*, an elite counter-insurgency unit. Trained by Israeli military advisors during the imperial era, the unit was brought into Addis Ababa and stationed at the former palace during the first phase of the Terror. Here, it operated under the direct command of the Derg rather than the Ministry of Defense.<sup>202</sup> Especially during the latter stages of the Terror, when the Derg successfully reasserted its claims on a monopoly of violence, the unit was to become infamous for its violent role in counter-insurgency operations.<sup>203</sup>

An equally consequential development during the first phase of the Terror was the introduction of systematic house searches. The *Asesa* ['search campaign'] soon became an integral feature of the Ethiopian Terror. The first *Asesa* of the Terror years, a search for firearms held without permit, was announced at the end of November 1976.<sup>204</sup> In the context of a heavily armed capital - Paul Brietzke estimates that at the time of the revolution there may have been as many as 300,000 pistols and rifles in civilian hands in Addis Ababa alone<sup>205</sup> - the Derg sought to limit the urban opposition's access to

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201. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 209.

202. Ofcansky and Berry, *Ethiopia*, 301; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 110.

203. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

204. *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 November 1976, 'To Safeguard Revolution: PMG Issues Directives on Search of Fire Arms'

205. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 172. It should be noted, however, that automatic rifles, which were of the most value to insurgents, were scarce. Access to such automatic weapons remained a challenge to the EPRP's guerrilla efforts throughout their duration; see Interview, Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012.

weapons. Search teams were dispatched to conduct unannounced searches of neighbourhoods, escorted by armed vehicles. Citizens were encouraged to produce any arms in their possession, and offered an amnesty for guns kept without a valid permit. Those attempting to withhold arms from the search teams, on the other hand, were "considered to be anti-revolutionary" and treated accordingly. While innocuous compared to later search campaigns, this first *Asesa* introduced a practice that subsequently evolved into an integral and deeply violent feature of the urban Terror.

Systematic state violence, albeit hesitant and small-scale compared to its later incarnations, was thus a defining feature of Ethiopia's urban Terror from its onset in September 1976.

### **External violence and internal divisions**

The onset of the urban Terror caused deep and consequential divisions to occur within both the EPRP and the Derg. The EPRP's urban guerrilla strategy was denounced by leading figures within the party as a deviation from agreed strategy, causing a violent rift that accelerated the organisation's demise. Within the Derg, meanwhile, the organisation of systematic state violence deepened dissensions and factionalism. Internal power struggles paralysed counter-insurgency efforts. The structural marginalisation of Mengistu Haile Mariam and his allies in December 1976 briefly suggested the possibility of a less violent riposte to the civilian challenge, but ultimately laid the foundation for further internal purges.

*(i) A party divided*

The urban EPRP's gradual militarisation had been an organic process, flowing from its need for resources and security as well as from its leadership's urban bias and reluctance to negotiate with the regime. Once an urban guerilla strategy was internally verbalised and proposed, however, it drew immediate opposition from some members, being condemned as a deviation from the party's agreed prioritisation of the rural armed struggle.<sup>206</sup> Opposition rapidly developed into a division that did significant damage to the party's structure and to the prospects of its struggle. The 2012 publication of Hiwot Teferra's memoir shed new light on this chapter of revolutionary history and briefly brought it to the forefront of national memorialisation,<sup>207</sup> but a history of the EPRP's internal divisions is yet to be written. Here, we shall merely highlight aspects of this division that directly affected the unfolding of Ethiopia's urban Terror.

When the EPRP leadership sought to formalise its evolving strategy of "offensive defense" in August 1976, the approach was vehemently opposed by central committee members Berhane Meskel and Getatchew Maru. The group which opposed the proposal to adopt an urban guerilla strategy consisting primarily of targeted assassinations was led by prominent central committee members Berhane Meskel Redda and Getatchew Maru. Their opposition was rooted in strategic as well as in moral objections; it centred on the rejection of a prioritisation of the urban struggle and on the condemnation of the

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206. See ERTDRC 0015480, ስለ ብዙሃን ምስመር። ['On the Majority Line'], 22 October 1978.

207. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*. Hiwot was married to Getatchew Maru, one of the leading actors in the division.

assassination of civilians.<sup>208</sup> Other disagreements, notably over the Eritrean question and the absence of a democratic culture within the EPRP,<sup>209</sup> contributed to the dissension.<sup>210</sup> At its core, however, the split concerned the launch of the urban assassination campaign.

In November 1976, Berhane Meskel and Getatchew Maru were accused of having "violated democratic centralism" and stripped of their membership on the central committee. This sealed the rupture within the party. Sustained attempts to vilify and scapegoat the opposite side deepened, inflaming the internal division. Both sides continued to refer to themselves as the EPRP. Berhane Meskel's 'rectification movement' derided its opponents as 'the clique', which in turn disparaged the former as *Anja* ['faction']. Divisions were further accentuated by a lack of open discussion and by the deliberate misinformation of the party's membership base. Henceforth, all collaboration with the regime by EPRP members and each setback to the party's operations and strength was ascribed to *Anja* activities. Perceptions that those who opposed the EPRP's urban strategy of 'offensive defense' collectively collaborated with the Derg took deep roots.<sup>211</sup>

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208. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael (Berhane Meskel's wife), 30 March 2012.

209. See Berhane Meskel's summary of differences, which was intended to popularise his position but failed to circulate widely: ERTDRC 0015480, ስለ ብዙሃን ምስጢር። ['On the Majority Line'], 22 October 1978.

210. Remarkably, the 'rectification movement's' arguments largely parallel ex-post facto self-criticisms voiced by former party members, centring on the ill-fated shift to urban insurgency and the lack of internal democratic practice. See interviews, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012 and Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012; cf. Assafa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for Renewal*, 36-7.

211. An anecdote told by Tadelech Haile Mikael (Interview, 30 March 2012) about her time in prison illustrates the circulating rumours of collaboration: "We were asking them, when new arrivals were coming: 'What is new in town?' And when they asked [one newly arrived lady], she didn't know that I was the wife of Berhane. So she said: 'The new thing is that they said that [Berhane Meskel] is in the Palace. And people knew, so they said: 'Ah, he is in the palace? What is he doing in the Palace?' 'Oh, haven't you heard that he is an appointee?' - And then, when she discovered who I was.... [laughs]. Because we were both there [according to the story], Berhane and his wife."

The reality of the ties between those EPRP members who opposed their party's lethal urban strategy and the Derg was rather more ambiguous. The majority of the former continued to oppose the military regime, carrying out underground activities and seeking to reinforce the rural armed struggle. Such opposition, however, now needed to be engaged in within the context of a dual danger, posed not only by the regime but also by their former party comrades.<sup>212</sup>

By early 1977, the divide within the EPRP had deepened and militarised to the extent that the same logic of violence that justified the assassination of regime supporters was also applied to party dissidents.<sup>213</sup> "Thereafter", Aklilu Kebede recalls, "we started killing each other."<sup>214</sup> Getatchew Maru became the most prominent victim of this internal violence. After being detained in a party safe house, he was shot by an EPRP member when the house was about to be raided by regime forces.<sup>215</sup> He died at the hands of the party that he had led and shaped in the previous years. Berhane Meskel escaped to the countryside, where he was arrested and subsequently killed in July 1979.

The internal split within the EPRP deeply disrupted the working of the party's organisational structure.<sup>216</sup> In the following months, it also eroded the internal cohesion and trust on which the party's early growth had been founded, and expedited the leaking of essential information to the military regime through denunciations and defections.

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212. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*, passim.

213. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 314-6.

214. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

215. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*, 268; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 322.

216. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 325.

*(ii) A regime divided*

In the wake of the Terror's onset, internal power struggles within the military regime intensified. The Derg experienced high levels of factionalism from the moment of its formation in June 1974. Initially, some of its factions mapped onto pre-existing background factors, such as attendance at different military academies: thus a majority of Derg members were graduates of Holeta, widely considered the inferior academy; the minority that had graduated from Harer were gradually purged from the regime.<sup>217</sup> Yet in spite of such early tendencies towards factionalism, a balance of power among the junta of leading Derg members had developed.<sup>218</sup> Factions that had formed around prominent figures such as Atnafu Abate, Alemayehu Hailu and Mengistu Haile Mariam had checked each other's influence.

The alliance of Mengistu Haile Mariam's faction with Meison and the other political groups that constituted POMOA disrupted this balance of power.<sup>219</sup> The formation in late 1976 of a new party, *Abyotawi Seded* ['Revolutionary Flame'], destined to eventually take Meison's role in government<sup>220</sup> and controlled by Mengistu's supporters, further strengthened the latter's hand within the Derg.<sup>221</sup> New alliances and the adoption

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217. Robert Rinehart, 'National security', in Harold Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study* (DA Pam: Washington, 1981), 252. The Derg's chairmen - Tafari Bante, Mengistu Haile Mariam and Atnafu Abate - were all graduates of Holeta Military Academy; cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 167; Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 114.

218. This junta consisted of the members of the 'Ad-hoc Supreme Organising Committee': Captain Alemayehu Hailu, Major Asrat Desta, Major Atnafu Abate, Major Berhane Bayeh, Major Demissie Deressa, Major Getatchew Shibeshi, Captain Kassaye Aregaw, Major Kiros Alemayehu, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, Captain Moges Wolde Mikael, Major Nadew Zacharias, Major Sisay Habte Wold, Major Teka Tulu and Major Tesfaye Gebre Kidan. Cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 167-8.

219. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 173-81.

220. For a concise summary of the process whereby Abyotawi Seded gradually dislodged Meison, see FCO 31/2083-247, 'EAD briefing on the Horn', 3 October 1977.

221. Gebru Tareke, *The History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, 47.

of radical ideology provided Mengistu and his supporters within the Derg with formidable tools of power,<sup>222</sup> allowing him and his allies to increasingly dictate the direction of the Ethiopian revolution.<sup>223</sup> By June 1976, Mengistu had risen to prominence visibly enough that even *The News American* observed that he had "slowly emerged as the country's undisputed first among equals."<sup>224</sup>

This was only half true. Mengistu's position within the Derg was dominant, but remained intensely disputed. His growing influence met resistance from the factions opposing him within the regime. Andargachew Tiruneh suggests that this resistance became organised following the execution of Sisay Habte Wold and other senior army officials, accused of plotting a coup, on Mengistu's orders in July 1976 - an episode which paralleled events surrounding the execution of the 'the sixty' leaders of the *ancien régime* in November 1974.<sup>225</sup> A committee of senior Derg members was formed, charged with delimiting the powers of Mengistu, as well as with rearranging the organisational structure of the Derg. A restructuring of the regime, it was hoped, would prevent further enactments of such unilateral and impromptu execution orders. In the long months during which the committee debated what form this rearrangement should take, tensions within the regime intensified further. René Lefort reports that revolvers were drawn during at least two Derg meetings in August 1976.<sup>226</sup>

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222. Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts*, 47.

223. Cf. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 26.

224. *The News American*, 10 June 1976.

225. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 181-4; cf. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 179; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 140.

226. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 194.

The reorganisation of the Derg's structure finally occurred in December 1976. Proclamation 108 of 1976, published on 29 December,<sup>227</sup> radically altered the power dynamics within the Derg. In its restructured form, the Derg bestowed vastly increased powers onto its chairman, Tafari Bante. Whereas his role had previously been restricted to chairing the deferential Council of Ministers, he was now put at the helm of the Derg's three organs - Congress, Central Committee and Standing Committee - and recognised as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.<sup>228</sup> A new position - Secretary General of the Derg - was created for Captain Alemayehu Hailu, a close ally of Tafari Bante, thus further strengthening the anti-Mengistu group within the regime. The powers of the Derg's second vice-chairman, Atnafu Abate, were marginally expanded to include responsibility for the politicisation, organisation and arming of the people's militia.<sup>229</sup>

The evident target of these reforms was Mengistu Haile Mariam. Apart from retaining his position as first vice-chairman, he "was stripped of practically all his Derg functions."<sup>230</sup> He was assigned the same inconsequential position of chairing meetings of the Council of Ministers that Tafari Bante had previously held, while losing many of his prior influential roles to the latter. In effect, the reforms marginalised Mengistu while strengthening his moderate opponents within the regime. They not only curtailed Mengistu's own functions in the Derg and replaced them with largely ceremonial roles, his faction both within and outside the regime was also systematically dismantled.

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227. Cf. *Ethiopian Herald*, 30 December 1976, 'PMAC announces revised structure'.

228. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 187.

229. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 187.

230. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 188; cf. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 56; Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 194; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 141-2.

Supporters within the Derg had their spheres of influence reduced, and in several instances were sent abroad "for political education".<sup>231</sup> Yet more significantly, POMOA, which was largely made up of Mengistu's allies, was placed under the immediate jurisdiction of the Derg's three organs, and thus removed from the reprimanded vice-chairman's direct sphere of influence. In the short term, the restructuring of the Derg achieved the sidelining of Mengistu for which it had been undertaken. Ultimately, however, the reforms accomplished the inverse of their design. In strengthening the position of the Derg's chairman while keeping Mengistu but one position removed from such power, the restructured Derg offered the future dictator both incentives and ready-crafted tools to expand his personal power.

The deep changes in the Derg's power dynamics introduced by Proclamation 108 in December 1976 had significant implications for the emerging urban Terror. The EPRP's burgeoning assassination campaign posed a formidable challenge to the Derg, but - much as the repression of the urban opposition in September 1976 had been the initiative of Mengistu's faction rather than a unified regime policy<sup>232</sup> - there was little agreement over how to respond to this affront. Multiple sovereignty within the Derg remained one of its defining features.

Whereas radical Derg officers around Mengistu Haile Mariam had led the repression of the EPRP from September 1976,<sup>233</sup> the regime's newly-empowered moderate faction attempted to ease rather than to incense the conflict. Including known

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231. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 188.

232. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 189.

233. In light of Mengistu's proactive role in the urban repression of the EPRP from September 1976, Christopher Clapham's suggestions that Ethiopia's future dictator entered the EPRP-Meison conflict following his marginalisation within the Derg in December 1976 appears misconceived. Cf. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 56.

EPRP sympathisers such as Moges Wolde Mikael in its ranks,<sup>234</sup> the anti-Mengistu faction sought to return to a more conciliatory position towards the urban opposition. As a result, the regime's policy towards the EPRP in these months lacked coherence: radicals were still able to use government papers to urge citizens "to make [a] final effort to wipe out counter-revolutionaries",<sup>235</sup> but moderates opposed any direct action against the urban opposition and prepared appeals for the formation of a united front. The resulting ebb of the previous policy of repression strengthened the EPRP and triggered calls by radicals to arm urban regime supporters.<sup>236</sup>

The shift towards a conciliatory position became evident in messages delivered by Tafari Bante in late January 1977, appeals that were to hasten his fall from power. In an address to the nation delivered on 29 January, Tafari Bante argued that the revolution could only be defended by the formation of a united front of revolutionaries, a category in which he appeared to include the leftist urban opposition.<sup>237</sup> At a "mammoth rally" in Addis Ababa's Revolution Square two days later, the Chairman reiterated his call to "progressive groups, all other democratic forces and patriots to bury their minor differences and create a united front in defence of the Revolution and the unity of Ethiopia."<sup>238</sup> Tafari Bante's speech deviated from established protocol in a number of ways, marking a statement of intent both with regard to the factionalism that plagued the Derg and to the wider urban conflict. Contrary to common practice, he delivered a

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234. On Moges' ties to the EPRP, see Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 108-9, 115, 137, 165, 311.

235. *Ethiopian Herald*, 19 January 1977, 'Masses Urged to Make Final Effort to Wipe Out Counter-Revolutionaries'.

236. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 164-5.

237. *Ethiopian Herald*, 30 January 1977, 'PMAC Chairman Addresses Nation: Progressives, Patriots Called on to Join Forces'; cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 189.

238. *Ethiopian Herald*, 1 February 1977, 'Masses Pledge to Defend Revolution'.

free speech in place of the usual reading of a Derg-approved script. Wearing casual civilian clothing, he was flanked not by his vice-chairmen, Mengistu Haile Mariam and Atnafu Abate, but rather by his allies within the Derg, Moges Wolde Mikael and Alemayehu Hailu.<sup>239</sup> Most striking was the content of the speech, refraining from any condemnation of the EPRP and instead reiterating his call for the formation of a united front of revolutionaries, widely interpreted as an invitation to the EPRP and a public disassociation from the policies of his regime's radical wing.<sup>240</sup>

Not all present at the rally shared the enthusiasm for a united front. Mengistu Haile Mariam, whose absence from Tafari's side at the rally can be interpreted as a sign either of his marginalisation or of his disagreement,<sup>241</sup> was the crowd's hero of the day. The adulation he received in crowd chants eclipsed the support given to his opponents within the Derg, whose restrained and gradualist approach failed to win over radicals. Meison supporters in particular came out in large numbers in support of the vice-chairman whose fortunes appeared so closely tied to their organisation's. In the course of the rally, these supporters candidly chanted their preferred solution to the challenge posed by the urban opposition: "let us meet the white terror of reactionaries with the red terror of the oppressed."<sup>242</sup> These chants appear to have been among the earliest collective invocations of the concept of 'Red Terror'. As conceptualisations of revolutionary violence evolved, the reality of Red Terror was closing in on Addis Ababa.

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239. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 195-6.

240. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 85; Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide*, 85; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 189.

241. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 143.

242. *Addis Zemen*, Ter 24 1969 E.C. [1 February 1977]; cf. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

## Chapter 3 - Control and Agency

### *The Decentralisation of Collective Violence, February to July 1977*

The rise of the Derg's radical faction in February 1977 spelt the end of the military regime's ambivalent policy towards its clandestine urban opponents. As the EPRP's assassination campaign reached its highest intensity, the Derg and its civilian allies began to arm the urban population and to routinise practices designed to encourage denunciation and the 'plucking out'<sup>1</sup> of alleged counter-revolutionaries. These strategies confirmed the trend towards a decentralisation of the state's means of violence, empowering local actors to carry out 'revolutionary measures' without sanction or accountability. The urban Terror thus further diversified into a plethora of localised terrors. Any semblance of the rule of law - long since disdained by senior government figures as a bourgeois luxury that cannot be indulged in during times of revolution<sup>2</sup> - vanished, soon to be followed by any agreed differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate exercises of violence. The Terror thus entered its second phase, defined by the dissemination and democratisation of the state's means of violence. Following the infamous May Day massacre of 1977, in which hundreds of urban youths were executed, the period of the *Netsa Ermeja* ['Free Measure'] marked the apex of decentralised violence in Addis Ababa.

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1. መንጠር ዘመቻ ['a plucking out campaign'], one of the common terms used for the counter-insurgency operations of this phase. Cf. SPO, የፌዴራል ክፍተኛ ፍርድ ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2001), 3; SPO, ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ, 22-3; Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian revolution', 49.

2. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 197.

Concomitantly, the disintegration of the EPRP's organisational structure ended any control by the party's central committee over its revolutionary terror campaign. Closely paralleling the decentralising dynamics of state terror, the civilian opposition's discourse and instruments of violence became localised and privatised.

The decentralised violence of the *netsa ermeja* dominated urban Ethiopia throughout May and June of 1977. The onset of the Ogaden war in July, however, signalled a slow demise of the Terror's phase of decentralised violence. Somalia's invasion plunged the regime into crisis, but it also provided it with new domestic legitimacy and resources. As the Derg's dependence on Meison decreased and the alliance soured, the exercise of collective violence began to be brought under greater state control. By August, Meison was forced underground; Ethiopia's urban Terror entered a final, less decentralised, phase.

Mapping out these developments, this chapter examines the making of aggregate violence, produced jointly but distinctly by supralocal and local actors between February and August 1977. The historiography of the Ethiopian revolution rightly recognises a violently localised phase of the Terror.<sup>3</sup> However, not only is this erroneously represented as the bloodiest period of revolutionary violence;<sup>4</sup> its transition into a distinct phase, in which collective violence was bureaucratised and institutionalised long before the end of the Terror, has also never been examined. As a result, the historiography has hitherto failed to account for the changing modes and agencies of violence in the Ethiopian Terror. Triangulating earlier scholarship with oral sources, a close reading of government publications and previously unexamined

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3. See especially the periodisation in Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror, 28.

4. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 57; Lefort, *Heretical Revolution*, 201; Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

archival documents, this chapter examines the linkages between centralised control and decentralised agency, disaggregating the problematic categories of political violence and state terror. In doing so, it probes the social as much as the political dimensions of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence.

### **"The terror has turned": the rise of the radical Derg**

On 4 February 1977, four days after Tafari Bante delivered his fateful conciliatory address there, Revolution Square again played host to a huge rally of regime supporters. But much had changed in the preceding days: this time, the estimated 200,000 demonstrators<sup>5</sup> - whose attendance had, as was becoming common practice, been achieved by the threat of violence at Kebele level<sup>6</sup> - had not been gathered in order to support the call for a united front by the moderates within the Derg. Instead, they were assembled to give an air of legitimacy to the murder of these very moderates on the previous day.<sup>7</sup> The fact that all of Mengistu Haile Mariam's most outspoken opponents within the regime were dead - including the Head of State, Tafari Bante, and the leading members of his faction, Alemayehu Hailu and Moges Wolde Mikael<sup>8</sup> - left little doubt

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5. Anne Cassiers and Jean-Michel Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes* (L'Harmattan: Paris, 2001), 478.

6. See a British Embassy report on such local coerced mobilisation: FCO 31/2257-15, Embassy Report on revolution and terror in Addis Ababa, 13 March 1978.

7. *Ethiopian Herald*, 5 February 1977, 'PMAC Pledges Democratic Rights to Masses: Mammoth Rally Here Denounces Enemies of Unity, Revolution'.

8. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 190. Kiflu Tadesse is ambiguous, even contradictory, on Moges Wolde Mikael's relations to the EPRP: see *The Generation Part II*, 108-9, 115, 137, 165, 311. Berhane Meskel asserts that Moges Wolde Mikael was, in fact, "a member of our party": ERTDRC 0015480, 'On the Majority Line', 28-29.

that the events of 3 February would transform the Derg and set Ethiopia's revolution on a more radical path.

Our understanding of what exactly occurred within the old palace on 3 February remains nebulous, but it exceeds the early accounts that still partly relied on, and hence replicated, subsequent government propaganda.<sup>9</sup> What is clear is that Mengistu's internal purge had, contrary to the official story of a "foiled internal fascist *coup d'état*",<sup>10</sup> been carefully planned over a period of time. Making and executing these plans alongside Mengistu were the head of the Derg's Security Department, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Asfaw - a "short, skinny, clever and hardworking guy who never laughed and was feared by many within the Derg"<sup>11</sup> - and Wez League leader Dr. Senay Likke.<sup>12</sup> Both men died in the day's clashes, the former after he and his men stormed a meeting of the Derg's Standing Committee. As planned, Mengistu and his allies had already left the meeting, leaving only his opponents to face Daniel Asfaw's bullets. The dead in the following shoot-out included seven prominent opponents of Mengistu's faction within the Derg<sup>13</sup> as well as Senay Likke, Daniel Asfaw himself and two of his soldiers. That there were casualties on both sides of the confrontation belies official accounts, which spoke of orderly executions after the purported counter-revolutionary coup plans were discovered.<sup>14</sup>

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9. E.g. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 143; Lefort, *Heretical Revolution*, 197-8. For more feasible accounts, see especially Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 190-2.

10. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 142.

11. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2011.

12. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 191.

13. These were Brigadier General Tafari Bante, Captain Alemayehu Hailu, Captain Moges Wolde Mikael, Lieutenant Colonel Asrat Desta, Lieutenant Colonel Hiruy Haile Selassie, Captain Tefera Deneke and Corporal Haile Belay. Cf. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 143.

14. Sauldie, Madan, *Ethiopia: Dawn of the Red Star* (Apt Books: New York, 1982), 193.

The elimination of Mengistu's opponents within the regime spelt the end of the Derg's era of contradictions and accommodations; opposing views could no longer be aired within the military regime.<sup>15</sup> Predictably, the changes to the Derg's structure introduced in December 1976 were swiftly revised. The greater power invested in the person of the Chairman was further augmented by authorising him to "take measures against anti-people and counter-revolutionary elements".<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the Chairman's position vis-à-vis the Derg's organs was strengthened, preventing them from holding the Chairman to account for his actions and minimising their authority.<sup>17</sup> As expected, Mengistu was announced to have been elected to the position of Chairman on 12 February 1977.<sup>18</sup> With these structural reforms, the rise of the radical Derg, led by its increasingly autocratic new Chairman, was complete.<sup>19</sup>

Changes to the regime's internal structure brought new international ties. In lieu of a non-aligned position, Ethiopia's foreign policy was now being reoriented towards the socialist bloc. The Soviet Ambassador was the first to congratulate Mengistu on his rise to power,<sup>20</sup> heralding the beginning of closer ties. The dynamics of the global cold war

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15. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution', 94; cf. Haggai Erlich, 'The establishment of the Derg: the turning of a protest movement into a revolution' in Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago University Press: 1979), 796

16. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 144; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 192.

17. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 193.

18. *Ethiopian Herald*, 12 February 1977, 'Revised Proclamation Issued: Defining Powers, Structure of Dergue'.

19. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 30.

20. Mengistu had already ingratiated himself with the Socialist Block as the PMAC's contact man to Moscow. See for example *Ethiopian Herald*, 4 December 1976, 'Vice-Chairman Hosts Soviet Ambassador'.

were increasingly becoming an important factor in Ethiopia's national and local politics.<sup>21</sup> Soon, they were to assume a deciding role in the urban Terror.

In resolving the regime's paralysing internal tensions, the killings of 3 February also signalled an immediate intensification of the urban conflict. *The Economist* was tragically right in inferring from the events of 3 February that "there are more children of the revolution yet to be devoured".<sup>22</sup> The rise of the radical Derg ushered in a new phase in Ethiopia's urban Terror. Bahru Zewde sees the event as marking "a turning point not only in [Mengistu's] own political fortunes but also in the intensification of violence."<sup>23</sup> Kiflu Tadesse, describing the EPRP's narrative of the turn of events, labels 3 February the beginning of "phase two of the [regime's] war of annihilation".<sup>24</sup> For Gebru Tareke, the killings of Mengistu's coup mark a turning point in the urban Terror because henceforth the confrontation was no longer primarily between rival organisations of the civilian left; rather, "the state agencies of repression" were unequivocally drawn into the conflict.<sup>25</sup> While one may quibble over aspects of some of these conceptualisations, a periodisation that recognises a profound discontinuity on 3 February is difficult to avoid. With the radical Derg in power, the urban Terror entered a new phase, defined by an intensification and a decentralisation of the use of violence. Both of these elements were announced by Mengistu in his speech on 4 February.

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21. Cf. Harold Marcus, 'Continuities in Ethiopian foreign policy from Menilek to Mengistu', in Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (Center for the Study of the Horn of Africa: New York 1988), 129; Abera Yemane Ab, *The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution*, passim.

22. *The Economist*, 12 February 1977, 'Ethiopia: Revenge of the maid's son', 64

23. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

24. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 188.

25. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian Revolution', 47.

The new Derg leader's performance at the huge gathering in Revolution Square could not have provided a starker contrast to Tafari Bante's conciliatory address there four days earlier. Gone were the inviting gestures, the placatory tone and the civilian clothing. In their place, Mengistu offered a chilling visualisation of his faction's alternative to the proposition of a united front: producing one of the enduring iconic images of the Ethiopian Terror and "legitimising the merciless shedding of blood,"<sup>26</sup> the new Head of State smashed bottles filled with red fluids. Henceforth, he shouted, "we will avenge the blood of our comrades double- and triple-fold." The revolution, he ominously declared, "has advanced from the defensive to the offensive position."<sup>27</sup> The crowd, whether cowed or mesmerised, responded in kind, chanting that "Terror has passed from the revolutionary camp to the anti-revolutionary camp."<sup>28</sup>

This intensification of the Terror was to be achieved by arming supporters of the regime within Kebeles and factories, a step long demanded by Meison but hitherto resisted by the moderate faction within the regime.<sup>29</sup> With the radical faction of the Derg that was allied to Meison now in power, the policy was set to be implemented. Alongside an ephemeral promise to recognise democratic rights - equally adopted from Meison's programme - Mengistu made the pledge to arm the urban population a central theme of his speech:

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26. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

27. *Ethiopian Herald*, 5 February 1977, 'PMAC Pledges Democratic Rights to Masses: Mammoth Rally Here Denounces Enemies of Unity, Revolution'. According to Tesfaye Mekonnen, this oft-repeated slogan was first coined by Meison's Negede Gobeze: Tesfaye Mekonnen, **ይድረስ ለባለታሪኩ** ['May it reach the protagonist'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 1977 E.C. [1985]), 230.

28. *Addis Zemen*, 28 Ter 1969 E.C. [5 February 1977]; cf. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

29. In the wake of the EPRP's mounting assassination campaign, Meison repeatedly issued calls to arm the urban population; its popular slogan was **አስታጥኩን አስታስጩርሱን።** ['Arm us, don't let us perish']: Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 24.

"Henceforth, we will tackle enemies that come face to face with us and we will not be stabbed from behind by internal foes [...]. We will arm the allies and comrades of the broad masses without giving respite to reactionaries [...]. In order to enable the broad masses - guardians of the nation and defenders of the revolution - to participate fully in the revolutionary process, the motto and clarion call of "Arms and Democracy to the Broad Masses" will be implemented."<sup>30</sup>

While democracy was to be in short supply in revolutionary Ethiopia, arms and access to the state's means of violence were readily available. In combination with other new practices of terror, the arming of the urban population changed both the momentum and the dynamics of collective violence in Addis Ababa.

### **New practices of terror**

Within weeks of monopolising state power, the radical faction of the Derg made its mark on the urban conflict by institutionalising new practices of revolutionary terror. Three initiatives in particular stand out: the arming of the urban population, the institutionalisation of large-scale search campaigns and the introduction of 'mass-confession sessions'.<sup>31</sup> These practices consisted of performances of threatened as well

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30. *Ethiopian Herald*, 5 February 1977, 'PMAC Pledges Democratic Rights to Masses: Mammoth Rally Here Denounces Enemies of Unity, Revolution'; cf. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 145.

31. Two further violent practices that anecdotally appear to have intensified during this phase (although figures are impossible to obtain) are torture and nocturnal executions. Since these operated covertly and were not part of declared government policy, we shall consider them separately at a later point in this chapter.

as actualised violence that were enacted in public and given ample media attention.<sup>32</sup> Their aim was to encourage denunciation and 'self-criticism' while disincentivising and punishing dissent. All three practices became prominent features of urban life by March 1977.

In the same month, the EPRP's assassination campaign had reached its highest intensity. Knowing that the turn in fortune on 3 February profoundly jeopardised its position, the EPRP intensified its urban terror and broadened the range of its targets.<sup>33</sup> As Bahru Zewde observed, "the announcement of assassinations of pro-Derg people and the posting of their obituaries became an even more common feature of the government press now than during the first phase" of the Terror.<sup>34</sup> Beyond the steady stream of assassinations, occasional propaganda operations were staged to remind the urban population of the party's reach and of the limits of government control. For example, when the Derg was set on celebrating International Women's Day on 8 March 1977 in grand fashion, seeking to showcase its new international positioning, EPRP activists spent the night plastering posters on every imaginable surface across Addis Ababa. In the morning, the capital awoke to a sea of opposition propaganda posters.<sup>35</sup>

An issue of *Democrasia* published concomitantly accused the regime of a series of atrocities.<sup>36</sup> Among them were reports that relatives of executed activists had been forced to pay 250 birr for the ammunition that had slain their loved ones in order to

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32. The three practices regularly made front-page headlines from March 1977. On the front-page of the *Ethiopian Herald*, 29 March 1977, for example, all three make headlines.

33. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 95; Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 56; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

34. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28.

35. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 20.

36. *Democrasia*, vol.3, no.1, Yekatit 26 1969 E.C. [5 March 1977], 3; cf. Gedion Wolde Amanuel, *The Day of the Martyrs*, 42-4; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 266.

have their corpses released for burial.<sup>37</sup> The practice attracted considerable attention when international journalists were made aware of it following the May Day massacre of 1977, quickly becoming emblematic of the regime's brutality and callousness. As we shall see, this common interpretation is at least partly based on a lack of engagement with the local dynamics of the practice, and may need to be revised. Nevertheless, the EPRP's report of such payments came to constitute as significant a propaganda coup as its audacious plastering of Addis Ababa with party posters.

*(i) Arming the urban population*

On 6 March 1977, the government's new offensive in the urban conflict began in earnest. Fulfilling Mengistu's promise to arm the urban population, the Derg's vice-chairman Atnafu Abate distributed the first 600 arms to perceived regime supporters. In the following days, *Abyot Tebeka* squads across the capital were armed and charged to "take speedy action against the so-called EPRP" and to "demolish forces opposed to the revolution and the preservation of national unity".<sup>38</sup> For several weeks, daily front-page headlines in government newspapers announced the arming of militias in urban Kebeles, Peasant Associations and factories. The policy of arming the urban population contributed to making Ethiopia at the time of the Terror "one of the most heavily armed

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37. Kiflu Tadesse also reports that 590 suspected EPRP militants were executed at prisons across Addis Ababa on 26 February 1977: Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 296-300. His detailed narrative, based on the experience of Kassa Kuma, who survived execution through a last minute escape, appears to be the only extant source for this event. How the remarkably high and precise number of victims has been arrived at is unclear.

38. *Ethiopian Herald*, 6 March 1977, 'Gov't Arms Six Hundred Workers, Kebele Representatives Here'; cf. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 208-9.

of countries on a per capita basis".<sup>39</sup> One journalist recalls his impression of the capital in the aftermath of the arming campaign: "Addis Ababa was full of arms. Every building had an armed guard around the clock [...]. Every workplace, every block association had its own militia."<sup>40</sup>

On 11 March 1977, less than a week after the first arms were distributed and certainly before the effects of the strategy of arming civilians could be assessed, the regime was already broadcasting its success. In spite of ongoing EPRP assassinations, it was announced that "the heightened consciousness, organization and arming of the broad masses have created a reliable and secure situation".<sup>41</sup> The broadcast continued its questionable logic by proclaiming that "the White Terror of anarchists who strive for higher positions by pretending to be progressives is being met with Red Terror". The concept of Red Terror had become deeply ingrained in official government policy.

The arming of the Kebeles was swift and pervasive, but it was never completed. Abera Yemane Ab, in charge of Kebele organisation within the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing and, as a Meison member, in favour of a rapid and comprehensive distribution of arms, lamented that "only 120 of the 297 Kebeles in Addis Ababa were armed by the end of July 1977".<sup>42</sup> Those Kebeles that were given weapons, however, now possessed militias of about 20 armed men,<sup>43</sup> charged with

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39. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 172.

40. Cited in Gedion Wolde Amanuel, *The Day of the Martyrs*, 89.

41. FBIS-SSA-77-050, 'PMAC explains nationalization of 'Voice of Gospel', 12 March 1977, vii.

42. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 95.

43. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 241-2.

"liquidating"<sup>44</sup> counter-revolutionaries in their neighbourhood. Such empowerment of the local *Abyot Tebeka* squads entailed a profound decentralisation of the state's means of violence. In distributing arms and providing a discourse legitimising their use, while neglecting to put significant accountability structures in place, the regime renounced centralised control over the exercise of violence. Daniel Branch has noted in another context that "insurgencies escalate into civil wars once civilians are armed by the state and incorporated into the counterinsurgency response".<sup>45</sup> Relatively unbound by institutional control, such civilians often become primary agents of violence in civil wars. This was certainly the case in Addis Ababa during the Terror. Armed civilians were empowered to pursue alternative political agendas or even highly personal or local feuds with government-provided arms and rhetoric.<sup>46</sup>

A surprising first casualty of the drive to arm urban militias was the regular police force. As Dereje Workayehu has shown, by mid-1977 the *Abyot Tebeka* squads "had taken the place of the police as the most immediate level of contact between the state and the citizenry."<sup>47</sup> The strengthening of the Kebeles and the formation of *Abyot Tebeka* squads, which had initially been motivated by the shortage of police forces as much as by popular demands for local self-administration and -defense, had the effect of undermining the activities and the authority of the police. Tensions between Kebele and Police authority remained a feature of urban life throughout the Terror. As this

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44. The infelicitous term was a favourite of the *Ethiopian Herald*, the government's English-language daily, and made almost daily front-page news. See e.g. *Ethiopian Herald*, 25 March 1977, 'EPRP Leader Here Liquidated'; *Ethiopian Herald*, 26 March 1977, 'Counter-Revolutionary Bandits Liquidated'; *Ethiopian Herald*, 27 March 1977, 'AETU Calls on Workers to Wipe Out Assassins, Counter-Revolutionaries'.

45. Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya*, 216-7.

46. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 145.

47. Dereje Workayehu, 'A history of police and policing in Addis Ababa under the Derg regime, 1974-1991', MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University (2009), 63.

study will show, the marginalisation of the traditional Police forces afforded Kebele and *Abyot Tebeka* leaders a degree of impunity that facilitated the establishment of local reigns of terror.

### ***(ii) Search campaigns***

If the first policy of the radical Derg consisted in the arming of its supporters, the second concentrated on the disarming of its opponents. On 23 March 1977, the regime launched its first comprehensive *Asesa* ['search campaign'] in the capital. All roads were blocked for unauthorised traffic.<sup>48</sup> Search teams, reinforced by peasants from the surrounding countryside, combed neighbourhoods for hidden opposition activists, weapons and propaganda material. The campaign doubled as crackdown on illegal activities, with the serving of alcoholic drinks prohibited during the day and newspapers reporting that unaccounted-for stacks of cash and illegal stashes of whisky were also confiscated.<sup>49</sup> This comprehensive *Asesa*, which lasted for four days, drew on the experiences of earlier searches. The first search in Addis Ababa, in November 1976, had enjoyed some moderate success in confiscating illegally held weapons.<sup>50</sup> More significantly, a comprehensive search campaign had been staged in Dase town as a pilot project from 9 to 11 March 1977.<sup>51</sup> Following the EPRP's assassination of Major

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48. *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 March 1977, 'Gov't Launches Search Campaign in Addis Ababa'.

49. *Ethiopian Herald*, 21 March 1977, 'Large Quantities of Arms Captured'.

50. *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 November 1976, 'To Safeguard Revolution: PMG Issues Directives on Search of Fire Arms'.

51. Abdu Muhammad, 'A history of Dase Town', 84.

Negussie Tuji, the Chief of the Public Safety Office in Wollo, through a bomb planted in his car, Dase town had been put on hold for three days. Twenty-two search teams, one per Kebele, scoured the neighbourhoods, effectively dismantling the EPRP's organisational structure. For the Derg, the Dase search campaign was a resounding success. Unsurprisingly, the regime was eager to repeat this feat in Addis Ababa.

Yet the outcome of the March 1977 search campaign in Addis Ababa was far more ambiguous. While the government had issued members of search teams with special identification badges as a mark of legitimacy and due process,<sup>52</sup> "the operation was carried out in an anarchical manner, each squad a law unto itself".<sup>53</sup> The search campaign proved profoundly unpopular, eliciting official protests by Atnafu Abate and other Derg members. Kiflu Tadesse suggests that the search damaged the reputation and standing of Meison, which was seen as its architect, preparing the ground for its marginalisation.<sup>54</sup>

But despite its setbacks, the search did achieve some of its goals. While failing to demolish the EPRP's organisational structure in the manner of the Dase town *Asesa*, the capital's March search campaign did claim the lives of several prominent party leaders: Dr. Tesfaye Debessai jumped off an apartment building as a search team closed in on him;<sup>55</sup> Markos Hagos died in a shootout;<sup>56</sup> and, unbeknownst to the Derg, Melaku Markos, Yohannes Berhane and Nega Ayele were all killed on the outskirts of Addis

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52. *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 March 1977, 'Gov't Launches Search Campaign in Addis Ababa'.

53. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

54. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 201.

55. *Ethiopian Herald*, 25 March 1977, 'EPRP Leader Here Liquidated'.

56. *Ethiopian Herald*, 27 March 1977, 'Former Chairman of Defunct CELU Killed'.

Ababa, allegedly in the company of Englishman and EPRP supporter Dr Hastings Morton.<sup>57</sup>

On 7 May, a search campaign again brought the capital to a standstill for three days,<sup>58</sup> to similar effect. Due to the widespread protests over the conduct of *Abyot Tebeka* squads in the March *Asesa*, this second search campaign was conducted largely by the army and appears to have been more centrally controlled and less arbitrary in its use of violence as a result. Like its predecessor, the search campaign of May 1977 claimed the lives of several senior EPRP members.<sup>59</sup> Paralleling the drive to arm civilians, these search campaigns devolved considerable resources and authority to local actors, who were widely left unaccountable and thus able to settle personal and local scores in the name of government policy.

### ***(iii) 'Mass-confession' sessions***

A third initiative of the radical Derg that became prominent in March 1977 consisted of so-called 'mass-confession' or 'public-exposure' sessions. These were gatherings at which employees and citizens were cajoled or threatened, by means of elaborate and lengthy performances, into denouncing colleagues and neighbours or into confessing their own counter-revolutionary activities. This public inquisition into urban Ethiopians' revolutionary, or perhaps loyalist, credentials was conducted at "government ministries,

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57. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27-8.

58. *Ethiopian Herald*, 8 May 1977, 'To Root Out Internal Reactionary Elements: Second Round Search Campaign Begins Here'.

59. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 202-4.

public utilities and all major organisations, [which were] required to 'cleanse' themselves by the exposure of 'reactionaries' within their midst."<sup>60</sup> They became such a prominent feature of Ethiopian public life that for the subsequent year it appeared as though "the whole country was gripped in a process of 'mass confession' and 'self-denunciation'."<sup>61</sup>

A report by an informant of the British Embassy describes such a performance, fittingly held at the National Theatre for the entire Ministry of Agriculture.<sup>62</sup> This particular public-exposure session was enacted in April 1978, a full year after the first of these meetings were held, and was hence probably more elaborate than earlier renderings. Nonetheless, it vividly conveys the performances of violence, the social dynamics of confession and the fatal dangers of denunciation that characterised these sessions from the beginning. In preparation for the session, committees were formed in each Department of the Ministry, charged with interviewing all employees and registering their denunciations. Then the entire Ministry was closed for a day, as all staff were required to attend the session. The gathering "started at 8 am and finished at 5.30 pm with no break." The day began with "hoards of children" marching onto the stage,

"dressed in red and shouting slogans against enemies of the revolution. Samples were: 'enemies will be eliminated'; 'you are known and will be dealt with'. [...] The point was then made to the assembly that they were now to receive their only chance of confession and, motherland willing, forgiveness. The Master of Ceremonies then asked: 'What shall we do with

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60. FCO 31/2257-29, Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 25 April 1978.

61. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 192-3.

62. FCO 31/2257-29, Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 25 April 1978.

those that do not confess?'. The shout went up from the body of the hall: 'Kill them'. [...] No one dared [to protest]."<sup>63</sup>

Several hours were then taken up with the registration and declaration of confessions and denunciations. The personal nature of this process is indicated by the experience of the informant, who worked within the Wildlife Department. Of the Department's forty Addis Ababa-based staff, nine had been denounced in advance. On the day, a further four were incriminated. Among them, our informant recalls,

"was the head of the department, who had been identified by a drunken lout employed as a game scout. It is thought that because the head of department had attempted to discipline him, he paid off the score by identifying him. [...] However, he in turn was accused by another colleague of having taken bribes while on guard duty at Debre Zeit."<sup>64</sup>

Being denounced carried considerable risks. While some of the accused were released after a mere night in detention, many others - particularly senior officials - were subjected to severe torture. The information thus extracted about the clandestine opposition's structure and activities laid the foundation for the Derg's counter-insurgency.

The radical Derg's new strategies - the arming of the urban population, the institutionalisation of large-scale search campaigns and the introduction of 'mass-confession sessions' - combined with constant media reports of confessions and opposition setbacks to put considerable social and psychological pressure on EPRP

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63. FCO 31/2257-29, Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 25 April 1978.

64. FCO 31/2257-29, Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 25 April 1978.

activists.<sup>65</sup> Even more significantly, they played a central role in replacing any semblance of the rule of law with formalised denunciations and in defining the Terror's politics of exclusion.

### **The erosion of law and the politics of exclusion**

Implicit in the radical Derg's new practices of terror were redefinitions of the role of the judiciary and of the meaning of citizenship. The logic of denunciation that drove these processes of redefinition was spelled out by a POMOA spokesman, who proclaimed that

"the only way to identify a counter-revolutionary is through the consciousness of the masses. The masses know who their friends and enemies are. After long observation they decide where someone belongs. They are not like the police, who have to arrest and interrogate a person. The masses know who someone is already. They pick him up only after they have identified him."<sup>66</sup>

Police work and conventional judicial process were thus ineffectual niceties rendered obsolete by the people's superior revolutionary knowledge. That the masses might be driven by motives other than revolutionary zeal was of little concern, at least at this stage in early 1977. With the abandonment of "Ethiopian socialism" for "scientific socialism", Ethiopia's legal system became profoundly influenced by that of the Soviet

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65. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 193.

66. Cited in Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

Union, and Marxist-Leninist interpretations of the law became dominant.<sup>67</sup> Law was hence viewed as a political instrument useful - but also necessarily subservient - to the goals and progress of the revolution. In similar fashion to its predecessor and successor regimes, the Derg treated criminal law and the police force as optional instruments of normalisation.<sup>68</sup> The killings of the Terror were conceptualised by their more intellectually disposed justifiers as fitting comfortably within such a Marxist conception of legality.<sup>69</sup>

Not only was the Law rendered a mere political instrument, even in this diminished state it suffered neglect. The first revolutionary years, 1975 and 1976, had witnessed a gradual shift away from prosecutions in newly established Courts-Martial under the revolutionary Special Penal Code, and towards indefinite detention.<sup>70</sup> By March 1977 the shift was complete, with an estimated 8000 detainees in Addis Ababa alone.<sup>71</sup> The introduction of new practices of terror rapidly furthered this erosion of legal process, as the logic of denunciation and "revolutionary measures on the spot" made the latter inconsequential. While pliant and under-employed special courts-martial and ordinary courts remained, these were "totally circumvented by torture, extrajudicial repression, and mass executions",<sup>72</sup> as well as by the abrasion of any existing trust in the legal process. The judiciary was thus at once redefined and marginalised.

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67. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The destruction of the rule of law under military dictatorship in Ethiopia', in CSHA, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Horn of Africa*, 50.

68. Pietro Toggia, 'The state of emergency: police and carceral regimes in modern Ethiopia', in *Journal of Developing Societies*, vol.24, no.2 (2008), 107-125.

69. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The destruction of the rule of Law', 51.

70. See the excellent discussion of the demise of the rule of Law in early revolutionary Ethiopia in Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 186-99.

71. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 192. Brietzke cautions that such figures are necessarily uncertain, especially since detainees were already being covertly executed.

72. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 196.

But it was not only the role of the judiciary that underwent a redefinition: the criteria of citizenship in revolutionary Ethiopia were similarly demarcated anew. The introduction of new practices of terror accentuated the regime's politics of exclusion and aided the process of 'othering' and depersonalising a sizeable proportion of the urban population. The Derg's penal code of 1974 had already introduced a narrowed interpretation of citizenship by defining a "revolutionary Ethiopian" in terms of loyalty to its "programme" of *Ityopia Tikdem*.<sup>73</sup> In February 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam explicitly re-emphasised the exclusive character of citizenship in revolutionary Ethiopia: "only those who are opposed to imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and who are genuine revolutionaries and patriots", he declared, "will have a place in Socialist Ethiopia".<sup>74</sup>

Revolutionary Ethiopia's politics of exclusion was minted at the political centre, but it was necessarily implemented by local actors on the ground. Here, it was readily localised into alternative conflicts or instrumentalised for personal agendas. Given the impunity provided by the demise of the courts to those deemed "genuine revolutionaries and patriots", highly local regimes of terror began to form. "If you had a nice car," one informant recalled about his Kebele in the Tekle Haymanot neighbourhood, "there was the danger of being accused of it being used for EPRP robberies and confiscated, with you being taken to prison."<sup>75</sup> In the absence of legal processes, the correlative of impunity was vulnerability, as the accused often found themselves without opportunity

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73. Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide*, 80.

74. *Ethiopian Herald*, 13 February 1977: 'Chairman Addresses Graduates of 30th Batch of Guennet Military School'.

75. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012; Ermias Wolde Amlak recalls a parallel case in his own Kebele in the Sidist Kilo neighbourhood, in which a General was killed by a Kebele guard who then confiscated and drove his "desirable" car: Interview, 29 March 2012.

of defense or appeal. The Terror was thus underwritten by the psychologically and socially terrifying assumption of guilt.<sup>76</sup>

The erosion of the Law and the promotion of a politics of exclusion and depersonalisation were correlatives to the Derg's newly adopted practices of Terror in early 1977. From the perspective of the Derg and of its civilian allies, these were ideologically justifiable and politically necessary elements in the campaign against the urban opposition, ushering in a new phase of regime power. For the majority of the population, however, this supposed transition was experienced primarily as an intensification of urban violence and as an intrusion into communities and private lives. This was particularly true in the more brutal localised reigns of terror, established by Kebele leaders like Girma Kebede.

### **The decentralised Terror on the ground: the case of Girma Kebede**

The decentralisation of the state's means of violence characterised the second phase of Ethiopia's revolutionary Terror. It took vastly different forms in different neighbourhoods, depending on the use to which such means of violence were put by local Kebele leaders. A cable from the British Embassy in Addis Ababa observed that "each Kebele administers its own area in the manner which it believes accords with the wishes of the revolutionary Government. Their interpretations of this vary widely," but generally tend towards the rise of "over-enthusiastic tyrants".<sup>77</sup> A more subtle analysis

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76. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 19.

77. FCO 31/2257-32, Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 27 April 1978.

would emphasise that each Kebele was administered within the bounds believed to accord with government policy; few Kebele leaders used their powers merely to implement vaguely communicated government guidelines.

In the historiography of the Ethiopian Revolution, the diminutive figure of Girma Kebede has become the epitome of this brutal local tyrant. The obituaries of his last group of victims, published after he had been removed from his Kebele position, consistently referred to him as *Aremenew* - 'the cruel one'.<sup>78</sup> His violence made him an embodiment of the armed and centrally empowered Kebele leaders that "transformed themselves into 'petty chiefs' who looked on their neighbourhood as a fief."<sup>79</sup> Depictions of Girma Kebede as an over-enthusiastic tyrant often represent direct reactions to the extent and brutality with which he used the power invested in him; they do not depend on the subsequent caricatures of the man and his actions that have repeatedly been drawn.<sup>80</sup> Such caricatures do little to explain the man or his actions. Whereas Girma's public and graphic murders have often been highlighted, the many forms of everyday violence that underlay and shaped this overt brutality have never been discussed. To consider these factors, a postponement of moral judgement is required.<sup>81</sup> Girma's violence becomes more intelligible and human - although no less barbaric and unjustifiable - once his personal life history comes into view and the organisational structures he operated within are grasped.

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78. ERTDRC 0015490, የሰማንያ ቀን መታሰቢያ። ['The eighth day memorial'] April 1977.

79. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 241-2.

80. The Derg later cast Girma Kebede as a paragon and scapegoat for excessive Kebele violence in general. Several authors, mostly linked to the EPRP, also cast him as a type of Meison's brutality during this period. For a refutation, see Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 93.

81. Roy Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence* (W.H. Freeman: New York, 1997), vii. Baumeister notes a resulting difficulty for the study of histories of violence: as the moral dimensions of their actions are rarely as real to perpetrators as to their victims, "any sincere effort to understand perpetrators will be somewhat insensitive to victims."

Yeraswork Admassie remembers Girma Kebede as "a frustrated, short guy with huge complexes".<sup>82</sup> Growing up without his father, he liked to imagine him an influential man, boasting to his classmates that he was an important general in the army. Kiflu Tadesse, who attended Tafari Mekonnen School with Girma, similarly recalls that "he was small, tiny even. In terms of behaviour, he was the kind of person who would lick the boots of his superiors."<sup>83</sup> At Tafari Mekonnen School, that initially meant Canadian Jesuits, who led the school. When the son of Ras Mengesha joined the class, Girma was the only student who made every effort at ingratiating himself with the young aristocrat, in marked contrast to his peers who consciously sought to treat the new arrival casually. Consequently, Girma was mercilessly bullied by his classmates. "That included myself," Kiflu admits, "I used to beat him." "We produced Girma" he added, before resorting to the language so often employed in discussions of Girma Kebede: "we produced a demon; an animal. He then later took revenge on society as a whole."

Following the 1974 revolution, Girma Kebede became an enthusiastic supporter of the military regime, thriving on the identity and status that the new political order afforded him. Highly involved in the affairs of his Kebele in the Arat Kilo neighbourhood, he was elected to office and put in charge of its *Abyot Tebeka* squad in early 1977. In this position, he stretched the power and implicit impunity given to him, establishing one of early revolutionary Ethiopia's most infamous local reigns of terror. Few if any Kebele leaders appropriated the discursive and material means of violence provided by the central state as ruthlessly as Girma Kebede. One informant, who lived

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82. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2012.

83. Interview, Kiflu Tadesse, 6 January 2012.

in an adjacent Kebele in the Arat Kilo area, provides a typical example of local memory about Girma's violence:

"I remember that, not far from my house, he killed a priest, in the middle of the night. One time he killed a University student at *Saba Dereja*. [...] I remember that he killed my teacher, Mesfin Woldeab, who was the chemistry teacher at Tafari Mekonnen. [It seems that] the reason was that he beat him at *Korombolla* ['pool']. He beat him so he just got killed! Then he killed a family which I know very well: Yakeb, Mekonnen, Alemayehu. [...] They called Alemayehu, they took him and his brother Mekonnen, his much younger brother Yakeb, and they just killed them, not far from Tesfaye Gebreselassie Printing Press. They killed them right there, although they had no involvement in politics. He just went out and killed anybody he liked. That was Girma Kebede."<sup>84</sup>

His most notorious assassinations occurred on 26 March 1977, when he and his *Abyot Tebeka* squad murdered nine civilians at the Berhanena Selam Printing Press.<sup>85</sup> The victims had been accused of counter-revolutionary activities by the Press's own *Abyot Tebeka* squad<sup>86</sup> on the previous day and handed over to the Police, but had subsequently been released for a lack of evidence against them.<sup>87</sup> Girma Kebede had little sympathy for such counter-revolutionary protocol; the Printing Press employees were brutally murdered in public. Among the victims was Daro Negash, an outspoken trade union activist who was also active in the EPRP's clandestine Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee.<sup>88</sup> Already the mother of eight children, she was heavily pregnant at the time

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84. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

85. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

86. For details on this squad and its activities, cf. ERTDRC 00-0001-06469, SPO Indictment and Judgment in the Berhanena Selam Case.

87. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

88. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 23.

of her murder.<sup>89</sup> The gruesome scene of her killing triggered complaints that soon reached the Derg's leadership, by whom they were later instrumentalised to abdicate responsibility for Kebele crimes and to re-establish a degree of centralised control over the exercise of violence. For many residents of Addis Ababa, the murder of Daro Negash and of her unborn child became one of the defining and symbolic images of the urban Terror.

Not content with establishing a revolutionary reign of terror in his own Kebele, Girma extended his activities into neighbouring administrations that he deemed insufficiently revolutionary.<sup>90</sup> It was while pursuing such extra-Kebele activities, presiding over a 'mass-confession session' held for the Ministry of Education, that Girma triggered his own downfall. According to Shiferaw Bekele,<sup>91</sup> Girma and his comrades had been pursuing the dirty business of revolutionary justice with much drink and little rest in the days preceding this particular session at the Ministry of Education. Even less time and effort than customary was spent on examining the motives and contents of accusations and on listening to the defence of the accused. Soon, a number of EPRP activists employed at the Ministry of Education were denounced for being counter-revolutionaries. Among them was Fekadu Seifu, a close friend of Shiferaw Bekele. Those who were denounced were lined up, immanently to be taken out and to face 'revolutionary justice' by nightfall. Yet while the floor remained open, a most surprising denunciation was made: Asrat Wolde, the brother of Haile Mariam Wolde

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89. ERTDRC 00-0001-06470 and -06471, 'SPO Indictment and Judgment in the Berhanena Selam Case'.

90. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

91. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 9 September 2011.

and hence Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam's uncle, was accused of secretly supporting the EPRP.<sup>92</sup>

Protestations by the accused were dismissed by Girma and his comrades, who were in no mood to indulge in a lengthy 'bourgeois' trial. The outraged and perturbed Asrat was made to join the line of detainees. There, Fekadu succeeded at making brief contact with him, indicating that he and his friends, like Asrat himself, had been unjustly accused. Soon after, the accused were taken from the Ministry for interrogation and eventual execution. Asrat's insistence that he was Mengistu's uncle must have made some impression on Girma's comrades, for contrary to common practice he was allowed to make a phone call in the early evening, with which he contacted regime officials he knew. The call achieved its purpose: by 8pm Derg officers arrived at the detention centre, taking custody of the detainees and driving them to the Palace. There, they were received by Major Berhanu Bayeh, one of many senior Derg members who had set up a field bed in the Palace for security reasons - a telling commentary on the perceived atrocity environment achieved by the EPRP's assassinations. The Major listened to Asrat's case and his advocacy of the other detainees' innocence, then ordered their release. The episode not only provides a revealing window into the arbitrary nature of processes designed to aid revolutionary justice; combined with the public outcry over the murder of Daro Negash, it also spelled the end of Girma Kebede's career as a semi-autonomous enforcer of the Terror. On 2 April 1977, he faced the firing squad in a popular public execution on the forest edge near Gulele.<sup>93</sup>

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92. Cf. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጩ ረጅም ጉዞ, 410-13; Zenebe Feleke, ነበር, 260.

93. Interview with Estifanos Terefe, who attended the execution as a teenager, 10 September 2012. Cf. *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 April 1977: 'Six Persons Executed for Dastardly Inhuman Murder of 24 Persons'.

The case of Girma Kebede vividly illustrates the violent effects that the devolution of power to the Kebeles could have. By March 1977, Kebeles had acquired authority to control all movement, to note all absences from official demonstrations and to survey and detain citizens at will. While Girma's Kebele constitutes an extreme example, power and violence were exercised in similar manner by local administrations across Addis Ababa. As Katz observed:

"Telephone numbers were publicized so that citizens could turn people in secretly. Children informed on their parents. The young defense squad members killed people over girlfriends and for simple revenge. The power within each kebele shifted to its most bitter and violent members. People who had never exercised power or control over anything were suddenly given guns."<sup>94</sup>

In the absence of centralised control and with every senior Kebele official given considerable leeway to act at will, it was, as one informant recalls, "as if we had over a hundred presidents."<sup>95</sup> Girma Kebede's case demonstrates the limited centralised oversight and control over Kebele activities. This was due to ineffective administrative structures as much as to the dynamics of decentralisation and local empowerment. When the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, nominally in charge of Kebeles, became aware of the violent excesses taking place in Girma's administration, it issued warnings to his Kebele and reported its local violence to the Derg. But no reprimanding action occurred.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the Derg's Legesse Asfaw - one of Mengistu's

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94. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 5.

95. Interview, Berhanu Disasa, 13 March 2011.

96. Interview, Abera Yemane, 13 December 2012. Abera was responsible for organising and assisting Kebele activities within the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing and was sentenced for holding that position in the Red Terror trials.

closest confidants<sup>97</sup> and in Dawit Wolde Giorgis' view "the most dangerous man the revolution has brought to power"<sup>98</sup> - issued Girma Kebede with a Kalashnikov "for his personal protection".<sup>99</sup> The Ministry of Urban Development and Housing's charge to supervise Kebele activities was effectively undermined by the autonomy and direct access to the Derg afforded to Kebele leaders.

Such support indicates that, contrary to subsequent government propaganda, Girma Kebede was not simply a 'bad apple'. Instead, his violence needs to be understood in the context of the organisational structures that he was operating within.<sup>100</sup> *Abyot Tebeka* Squads had been formed in response to perceptions of an atrocity environment generated by the EPRP's assassination campaign. Their organisational mandate was to stifle the urban opposition at the local level, using revolutionary methods of instant justice in contrast to the supposedly inefficient workings of police and courts.<sup>101</sup>

This mandate rested upon a national security discourse, which framed local violence as a necessary evil in the service of the greater national good. Implicit within this discourse was the de-personalisation of dissenters, cast as enemies of the state and thus stripped of any citizenship rights.<sup>102</sup> When Kebele officials denigrated the dignity of their victims by reducing them to the category of 'counter-revolutionary', and justified their violent excesses as the necessary seeds for a revolutionary harvest, they acted firmly within the operational narratives and normative social contexts of their

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97. FCO 31/2257-20, D. Day (British Embassy Addis Ababa) to A.G. Munro (EAD), 14 March 1978.

98. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 62.

99. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 93.

100. Cf. Huggins et al., *Violence Workers*, passim.

101. Proclamation 104, October 1976. Cf. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 55; Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 171-2.

102. Cf. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 18.

organisations. Central and local actors converged in shaping these organisational structures and in generating the resultant violence.<sup>103</sup>

### **The decentralisation of the EPRP's violence**

The rise of the radical Derg and the institution of new counter-insurgency strategies threatened the EPRP and curtailed its momentum. The "turn of the Terror" did not, however, result in a termination of the party's campaign of revolutionary violence. Rather, this campaign was at first intensified, and in the long term profoundly modified, as a result of the Derg's augmented bellicosity.<sup>104</sup>

Government control of Addis Ababa remained limited in the wake of Mengistu Haile Mariam's rise to the Derg's chairmanship. During a meeting in March 1977, EEC Ambassadors noted their concern at the developing security situation in the city and at the government's apparent inability to control the capital.<sup>105</sup> The precarious security situation was in part the result of a short-term spike in EPRP activity that followed the ascendancy of the radical Derg and of its civilian allies;<sup>106</sup> it was also, however, the effect of an important transformation in opposition violence that became increasingly apparent in subsequent months. This transformation was caused primarily by the disintegration of the EPRP's organisational structure.

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103. Abbink, 'The impact of violence', 138.

104. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 56; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

105. FCO 31/2080-66, Notes on the meeting of EEC Ambassadors in Addis Ababa, 16 March 1977.

106. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28.

The arming of the Kebeles, masterminded by Meison and its civilian allies within POMOA, localised the counter-insurgency and weakened the EPRP's sophisticated cell structure.<sup>107</sup> More significant yet was the loss of life at the party's leadership level in the subsequent search campaigns of March and May 1977. Leaders like Dr. Tesfaye Debessai, Markos Hagos, Melaku Markos, Yohannes Berhane and Nega Ayele lost their lives to the first search campaign;<sup>108</sup> Captain Amha Abebe, Dagnatchew Ayele, Kiflu Teferra and Mulugeta Zena were among the leading members of the EPRP that fell victim to the second.<sup>109</sup> The party's rank and file lived with the relentless pressure of the constant threat of terror and of the government media's 'psychological warfare', which consisted of the sustained broadcasting of rehearsed confessions and of government successes. These pressures put further strain on the EPRP's once remarkable command structure.

As the party's organisational structure crumbled, the trend towards the decentralisation of its terror campaign was reinforced. The intricate cell structure of the EPRP depended on centrally orchestrated meetings and communication between members.<sup>110</sup> Like a giant cardiovascular system, the party structure depended on a strong central muscle to keep its blood flowing. Consequently, the fracturing of the party structure, particularly at the leadership level, resulted either in organisational paralysis or in the self-determination of local cells and members. Centralised control

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107. For a detailed discussion of the EPRP's organisational structure, see Tesfu Kefyalew, 'The organisational structure'.

108. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27-8.

109. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 202-4.

110. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

over the exercise of violence gradually dissipated from March 1977;<sup>111</sup> the party's assassination campaign became decentralised and localised, at much the same time at which state terror underwent a parallel process.

The EPRP's urban defense squads continued to carry out centrally orchestrated activities and assassinations for at least another year. One of the party's leaders estimates that as many as 450 members were employed in such squads in May 1977.<sup>112</sup> Yet in the absence of a functioning command structure, their exercise of violence became increasingly autonomous and parochial.

### **The unheard Terror: keeping the media out**

The unfolding and decentralising urban Terror received little international attention. In the early months of 1977, the Derg sought to gain greater control over the media and over the narratives that were being produced about revolutionary Ethiopia. While the regime's 'Ethiopian Revolution Information Center' fashioned triumphalist accounts of peasants' and workers' progress,<sup>113</sup> media outlets were brought under government control and foreign journalists were expelled. Reliable news reports about the Ethiopian Terror thus became a scarce commodity.

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111. Kiflu Tadesse notes that from April 1977, the party's central committee in Addis Ababa was reduced to just two men: himself and Samuel Alemayehu: *The Generation Part II*, 307.

112. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 284.

113. Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *Ethiopia in Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977); idem, *Tasks, Achievements, Problems and Prospects of the Ethiopian Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977); idem, *The Men-in-Uniform in the Ethiopian Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1978).

In late 1975 the Derg had nationalised all printing presses and introduced censorship laws that facilitated the containment of expressions of dissent through official media outlets,<sup>114</sup> although open debates continued to be printed in the government daily *Addis Zemen* in early 1976. One noteworthy exception remained: 'Radio Voice of the Gospel'. During the late imperial era, the station had acquired as much of a reputation for its comparatively independent broadcasting as it had for introducing gospel music to Ethiopia.<sup>115</sup> It continued both traditions in the early revolutionary period. During the build-up to the first search campaign, the regime decided that in order to further the reach of the state and to curtail the inconvenience of independent journalism, the radio station was to be nationalised. On 12 March 1977, it was announced that the Derg had appropriated the facilities of 'Radio Voice of the Gospel'.<sup>116</sup> In a laborious twist of logic, the move was justified by polemics against "missionary spies" as well as on grounds of religious equality: if all religions were to be equal, none was to be favoured by being allowed to operate a radio station. "Since the revolution is not against any religion", it was argued, nationalisation was necessary in order to establish equality.<sup>117</sup> 'Radio Voice of the Gospel' was henceforth to be known as 'Radio Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia' and to be used "for the intensification and advancement of the revolution of the broad masses".<sup>118</sup> The last media outlet to operate with a degree of independence was thus transformed into a further mouthpiece of the government.

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114. Interview, Daniel Bekele, 2 March 2010. After being imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2005 elections, Daniel wrote his DPhil at the University of Oxford on the legal history of the media in Ethiopia.

115. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Baylor University Press: Waco, 2009), 107, fn. 397.

116. *Ethiopian Herald*, 13 March 1977, 'Government Takes Over RVOG'.

117. FBIS-SSA-77-050, 'PMAC explains nationalization of 'Voice of Gospel', 12 March 1977.

118. Harold Fisher, 'Ethiopia' in George Kurian (ed.), *World Press Encyclopaedia* (Facts on File: Minneapolis, 1982), 328.

The move to control the media continued when the Addis Ababa correspondents for AFP, Reuters and The Washington Post, who had remained following the first purge of foreign reporters in 1975, were expelled from the country. Subsequently, visiting journalists were monitored by official 'guides' and were required to have all their reports censored by the government-controlled Ethiopian News Agency before transmitting them, resulting in "a near total blackout of news about Ethiopia to the outside world".<sup>119</sup> That this blackout coincided with the escalation of the Terror was no coincidence; the realities of urban violence did not make for convenient propaganda. The implication was that international awareness of the Terror's atrocities remained limited to occasional reports by freelancers<sup>120</sup> and by human rights agencies.<sup>121</sup> Soon to accentuate this drought of media coverage was the escalating confrontation with Somalia, which attracted the bulk of international reporting on the Horn for its wider importance in the global Cold War. The urban Terror hence unfolded on the international community's blind side.<sup>122</sup>

The marginal exception to this blackout of international reporting on the Ethiopian Terror were the vetted reports on the progress of the revolution published by writers in the socialist bloc. When Fidel Castro visited Addis Ababa in March 1977,<sup>123</sup> Mengistu Haile Mariam had, in the words of a British diplomat, been revelling in the international

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119. Fisher, 'Ethiopia', 328.

120. E.g. Gunnar Hasselblatt, writing as Hans Eerik, 'Boy of 14 is shot dead after being tortured in Ethiopian Red Terror', *The Times*, 22 March 1978.

121. For a concise summary of Amnesty International reports, see the chapter on the Terror in Randi Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression: State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952-2005* (Addis Ababa University: Addis Ababa, 2007).

122. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 5.

123. *Ethiopian Herald*, 15 March 1977, 'President Fidel Castro Arrives Here for Visit'.

attention he was receiving "like a cat with a saucer of milk".<sup>124</sup> Heed paid by socialist bloc writers was welcomed, and created little difficulties for the Ethiopian News Agency's censorship office. The results were accounts that, as Donald Crummey candidly observed about Valdés Vivó's glorified narrative of Ethiopia's revolution,<sup>125</sup> "bad, but not wholly without value."<sup>126</sup>

The limits of the Derg's efforts to control and constrain the outward flow of information about urban Ethiopia's violence were soon to be tested. For the May Day massacres of 1977 represented collective violence on a scale that could not be kept hidden.

### **The May Day massacres**

The massacres that erupted in Addis Ababa on the eve of May Day in 1977 marked the single most violent day in the history of the Ethiopian Terror. They cost the lives of hundreds - perhaps even thousands - of urban youths. They generated some of the Terror's defining and enduring narratives, such as the oft-repeated account of parents having to pay for the bullets that slew their children. Yet upon closer inspection, these narratives have unexpected undercurrents, subverting the common interpretations of the violence that defined the May Day massacres and their aftermaths.

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124. FCO 31/2079-33a, Embassy Report to EAD, 25 March 1977

125. Raúl Valdés Vivó, *Ethiopia's Revolution* (International Publishers: New York, 1978).

126. Donal Crummey, 'Review: The Ethiopian revolution', in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol.15, no.2 (1981), 345.

May Day demonstrations in revolutionary Ethiopia had become occasions to mobilise supporters and to broadcast the strength of political organisations. Even with its back against the wall, the EPRP was not prepared to renounce this tradition. In light of evident dangers involved in rallying supporters in one place on May Day, it was decided to alter both time and venue. The conventional gathering in Revolution Square had already met violent resistance in the previous year. In its place, there were to be numerous smaller demonstrations, centred around local Kebele offices. For added surprise and security, these were to be held two days earlier, on the evening of 29 April 1977.<sup>127</sup>

The demonstrations began as planned. At dusk, thousands of EPRP supporters gathered around local Kebele offices. Since mobilisation had largely occurred through the party's Youth League, a vast majority of demonstrators were young, with many still in their teens.<sup>128</sup> The precise manner in which the violence erupted remains uncertain; like other aspects of the Ethiopian Terror, it is subject to conflicting accounts. In interviews, those who were associated with the regime at the time stressed the role of the EPRP's 'adventurism' in triggering the massacres: Meison's Abera Yemane Ab describes the demonstrations as an "insurrection", and sees the roots of the massacres in the fact that "EPRP youths had assembled in various places and were attacking the kebele offices with molotovs and throwing stones and all."<sup>129</sup> Former Meison leader Negede Gobeze makes an even stronger connection between initial violence by demonstrators and resulting massacres: "they threw molotovs and things like that, and

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127. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 316-8.

128. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

129. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

even [shot] pistols. So this was really an adventurous move, and unfortunately hundreds of young people paid for that."<sup>130</sup> Kassahun Berhanu, also a Meison member, concurs in seeing violent behaviour by demonstrators as the trigger for the massacres; he argues that "provocateurs were among the innocent thousands", and that it was the prepared armed violence of this subset of demonstrators that brought on the regime's heavy response.<sup>131</sup>

The chroniclers of the EPRP have questioned such accounts of Kebele officials acting merely in self-defence. Kiflu Tadesse notes that demonstrators were fired on using machine guns - firearms that the Kebeles' regular *Abyot Tebeka* squads were not commonly provided with at the time.<sup>132</sup> This is an important observation. While not contradicting a degree of bilateral confrontation, it suggests that the massacres were not spontaneous responses to violent demonstrations. Instead, they had been decided on and planned in advance. In this, Kiflu is certainly right.

The regime's preparation and imminent response to the demonstrations appears to have been built on inside information obtained through torture. According to Abera Yemane Ab, officially in charge of the organisation of Kebeles at the time, a mid-level EPRP member had been apprehended at Kebele level and divulged details of the planned decentralised protests. Taken to the Derg's Security Office for further interrogation, he provided the information on the basis of which the regime planned its response.<sup>133</sup> Soldiers and mounted jeeps were put on standby, awaiting calls from the

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130. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

131. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

132. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 316-8.

133. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

Kebele offices. The EPRP's leadership received indications of these preparations, but there was no time to call off the numerous decentralised demonstrations.

One informant who took part in the demonstrations as a member of the EPRP's Youth League remembers that "the Derg was aware of [our] activities and they were ready ahead of time. That was the day we lost a lot of our people."<sup>134</sup> Most of these losses came after the demonstrations had been dispersed. Demonstrators were rounded up and detained in police stations or Kefteгна prisons. Later in the night, hundreds of suspected EPRP activists were executed, both in prisons and in the forests outside Addis Ababa. The precise death toll of the massacre may never be ascertained. Official figures speak of 732 dead,<sup>135</sup> but in light of the government's interest in keeping the tally low a significantly higher number can safely be assumed. Bahru Zewde estimates that about one thousand EPRP supporters were killed in the massacres;<sup>136</sup> Rinehart suggests twice that figure, speaking of at least two thousand murdered youths.<sup>137</sup> Compounding the difficulties in estimating the death toll is the fact that many youths were only briefly detained at police stations and Kefteгна prisons before being picked up and driven to the forests on the edge of town - east towards Kotebe, north towards Sululta or west towards the old General Wingate school. There, they were executed and buried in unmarked mass graves.<sup>138</sup> Their names were not registered, neither were their families

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134. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012. Unaware of the interrogations by the Derg's Security Office, Aklilu tellingly ascribes the "leaking" of information about the demonstrations to the divisions within the EPRP.

135. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 201.

136. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28.

137. Rinehart, 'National security', 271; this is also the figure suggested in Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 23.

138. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012. It was only in the course of the EPRDF's 'Red Terror trials' that many names of the massacres' victims became publicly known.

informed. As more widely in the history of the Terror, numbers for the massacres therefore remain elusive. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the May Day massacres constituted "the largest mass execution of the revolution".<sup>139</sup>

The demonstrations that preceded the massacres represented the last time that the civilian opposition sought to flex its muscle through a show of large-scale support in the capital. At subsequent demonstrations, police duties were vastly reduced; their services were no longer needed, since these now became government-orchestrated parades rather than shows of dissent.<sup>140</sup> The bloody events of 29 April 1977 were conveniently ignored by the government media. An isolated reader of daily newspapers who had not heard the gunshots ring through the night and did not venture onto the streets of the capital in the following days could be excused for thinking that nothing of significance had occurred. On the streets, though, the suffering and grief were apparent everywhere.

By the evening of 30 April, Iddil mourning tents had sprung up in each neighbourhood. Even the Derg's Colonel Tesfaye Woldelessie, head of the Derg's Intelligence and soon to become infamous for his role in orchestrating the Red Terror, noted that the public mood turned against the regime as the scale of the massacres emerged. If the wisdom of demonstrating was initially questioned, people began to suggest that the government was systematically eliminating the youths.<sup>141</sup> The mortuaries, to which the corpses of those executed within the city were taken, filled up with citizens looking for the missing and with grieving relatives. It was here that families were charged to recover the corpses of their dead. The image of bereaved

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139. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 148.

140. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 80.

141. SPO, *ደግሞ የዘለ ዶሴ*, 52-3.

parents paying for the bullets that slew their children has become an infamous icon of the Ethiopian Terror. Too powerful to ignore, reports of the practice were soon picked up by the international media and have since become part of virtually every account of Ethiopia's socialist years. The interpretation the practice is given tends to centre on the barbarity of the Derg's violence, making it an object lesson in the regime's cruelty and inhumanity. This is too simple.

The local logic of the practice appears to have been rather more subtle, providing a revealing illustration of the interaction between centralised policy and local agency that defined the Ethiopian Terror in this period: when initially formed and armed, *Abyot Tebeka* members within Kebeles were provided with ten bullets each. Unauthorised or unaccounted bullets needed to be replaced at own cost. This made the shooting during the early stages of the May Day massacres, before the soldiers arrived on the scene, a potentially expensive exercise for many. Kassahun Berhanu sees this as the primary driver of the practice of charging relatives for bullets: at the mortuary, he suggests, "they were on guard. When somebody was sitting there they would say 'pay this amount to the kebele or you can't take this body'".<sup>142</sup> News of the practice were hugely damaging to the regime. But its dynamics encapsulate the complex interactions between centrally-imposed frameworks and locally-made decisions that defined the aggregate violence of this phase of the Terror.

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142. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

### *Netsa ermeja: the climax of decentralised violence*

The same dynamics also defined the months of the *netsa ermeja* ['free measure'],<sup>143</sup> the climax of Addis Ababa's decentralised collective violence that followed the May Day massacres. Violence continued to be aggregate, produced jointly but distinctly by central and local actors. But the massacres had brought some systemic changes with them: for the first time since the eruption of collective violence in the capital, the regime no longer saw the need to formally announce, explain or justify most of the 'measures' carried out in its name. A mere month earlier, Girma Kebede had been castigated in the official media after his public execution.<sup>144</sup> Now, the very practices that had defined his reign of terror were being tolerated and facilitated by the regime, and routinely reproduced at the local level. Such violence now scarcely required official explanation.

Like no other period of the Terror, the *netsa ermeja* bears out O'Kane's observation that "the essence of revolutionary reigns of terror lies in summary justice."<sup>145</sup> During the *netsa ermeja* justice became personified in the "the officer who has arrested the suspect, being judge, counsel, witness and executioner and all at one time." Summary justice precluded any process of appeal; victims were at the mercy of the the agents of the 'free measures'. As Kahssay Tekeste noted, "one could easily be dragged out of one's

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143. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28, argues that the phrase "could be translated in broad terms as an unrestricted license to kill." Former Meison activist Kassahun Berhanu contests this reading of the phrase, although he concedes that in practice this is how it was understood. For Meison, he contends, *netsa ermeja* began as a call for revolutionary measures 'independent' [a possible reading of *netsa*] from corrupt and inefficient bureaucratic processes of police and judiciary (see Interview, 24 August 2012). *De facto*, the two interpretations converged in the decentralised extra-judicial killings that came to define the *netsa ermeja*.

144. E.g. *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 April 1977, 'Six Persons Executed for Dastardly Inhuman Murder of 24 Persons'.

145. O'Kane, *The Revolutionary Reign of Terror*, 22.

home, have a sign posted around one's neck and be executed".<sup>146</sup> The agents of the *netsa ermeja's* violence ranged from soldiers, who took a leading role in the search campaign that shut down Addis Ababa for three days from 7 May 1977,<sup>147</sup> to hundreds of local "lumpen-proletarians",<sup>148</sup> who were employed in *Abyot Tebeka* squads across the city. Local actors given security roles in the Kebeles' defense squads or other government-endorsed armed militias often lacked the supervision and violence-scripting behavioural codes of the armed forces, thus becoming the primary agents of the *netsa ermeja's* violence. The Kebele and the street were the chief fora of the decentralised violence that defined these months. The 'revolutionary measures' taken by these local actors resulted in "a level of chaos that proved embarrassing to even the most ruthless members of the Derg."<sup>149</sup>

A significant but routinely ignored dimension of this violent chaos was the widespread occurrence of sexual assault. Sexual violence was a common feature of detention in the makeshift Kebele prisons that sprung up in these months. The official proclamation of *netsa ermeja* and the impunity that defined it provided a social context within which sexual crimes were easily carried out and justified with reference to the revolution's security discourse. Female detainees were regularly subjected to sexual abuse. Threats to rape wives, daughters or other family members are reported to have also been regularly employed in order to coerce collaboration or to break resistant

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146. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012. The practice of hanging signs around victims' necks, defining their alleged reactionary crimes, began during the *netsa ermeja*. However, it became most common in subsequent months during the official 'Red Terror', part of a cruel aesthetic of violence which saw the capital plastered with chromatic posters demanding the intensification of the Terror.

147. *Ethiopian Herald*, 8 May 1977, 'To Root Out Internal Reactionary Elements: Second Round Search Campaign Begins Here'.

148. Interview, Kiflu Tadesse, 6 January 2012.

149. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28-9.

detainees in interrogations,<sup>150</sup> adding a further layer of complexity to the difficult domain of sexual crimes in the Ethiopian Terror. Much research remains to be done on this sensitive subject.

In contrast to the marked silence about sexual violence in the Terror's memorialisation, the public display of dead bodies that first became a defining feature of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence during the *netsa ermeja* has received widespread attention, often being cast as a negative icon of the period. The practice left a deep impression on residents and visitors alike; the communicative dimension of violence was never clearer. Visiting Addis Ababa in the weeks following the May Day massacre, Anne Cassiers was aghast when finding corpses lining the streets. "Au propre comme au figuré," she was told by her local hosts, "la hyène s'est enhardie dans la ville; cette fois elle a pris goût à la chair humaine."<sup>151</sup>

The bodies of alleged 'counter-revolutionaries' were left on the streets for days, mutilated at night by hyenas descending from the forests on the city's edge. Relatives were widely prevented from retrieving dead bodies, resulting in an "unspoken ban"<sup>152</sup> on the public mourning of regime opponents. Thus in a further, posthumous depersonalisation of the victims, even their mourning in culturally prescribed ways was prevented by the Terror.<sup>153</sup> When the Terror ebbed off more than a year later, in 1978,

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150. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian Revolution', 51.

151. Cassiers and Besette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*, 478-9; ['Both literally and metaphorically, the hyena has settled in the city; this time, it has taken to the taste of human flesh.']

152. This curious but apt description was coined by Katz, 'Children's revolution', 5. How such a paradoxical reality emerges remains a task for future research.

153. Abbink, 'The impact of violence', 138; Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

much of this unexpressed grief was released into the public sphere. Visitors to Addis Ababa were surprised to find the city "full of women dressed in black".<sup>154</sup>

From one perspective it can be argued, applying Mbembe's perspective, that the public display of dead bodies served to inscribe a new set of social and spatial relations on the ground. The corpses provided a visible demonstration of the regime's ultimate sovereignty, and of the mortal dangers entailed in opposing it.<sup>155</sup> This would certainly become an intended meaning of such displays during the latter 'Red Terror'. During the *netsa ermeja*, however, the open display of bodies equally represents the erosion of precisely this sovereignty. For in most cases, these displays were less signs of a strong regime broadcasting its power than of the lack of centralised control and of the extent of impunity that defined the *netsa ermeja*. Decisions about whom to interrogate or kill were overwhelmingly taken at the local level during this phase of the Terror. Likewise, the impetus for the public exhibition of corpses tended to originate at the local level. The *netsa ermeja* represented the climax of the Terror's decentralised violence.

While recognising such local agency in the performance of violence, it is important to emphasise that the displays of dead bodies were the outworking of a legitimising framework that was instituted and upheld by the regime. The Derg's concern in the following months would be to gain greater control over the exercise of such practices, not to abolish them. For the military regime and its civilian allies, the public exhibition of regime-associated violence represented not merely a claim on sovereignty; it also provided an apologia for state violence. In this, it took the place of earlier justifications in government media. The period of the *netsa ermeja* constituted a crucial step in the

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154. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 5.

155. Cf. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 25-6.

regime's conceptualisation of revolutionary terror. A joint parade by regular armed forces and urban militia units on 24 June 1977 was hailed as an expression of the "red campaign against white terror".<sup>156</sup> This not only constituted an implicit recognition of the aggregate nature of collective violence during the *netisa ermeja*; it also marked a mature expression of a concept of Red Terror by the Derg. The appropriation of the notion of "red", revolutionary extra-judicial terror against "white", reactionary force was complete. The only remaining obstacle to the fully-fledged, officially proclaimed Red Terror of the end of the year was the limited extent of state control over the exercise of collective violence.

The urban opposition remained active during the *netisa ermeja*. But as the EPRP's structures and support weakened, members<sup>157</sup> were increasingly transferred to the safer rural insurgency headquartered at Assimba in Tigray.<sup>158</sup> The party's urban campaign of terror had been eroded by government-instigated decentralised violence, which had scarcely been subject to control by the state during the *netisa ermeja*. Such local autonomy would begin to dissolve in the wake of Somalia's invasion of the Ogaden.

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156. *Ethiopian Herald*, 25 June 1977, 'Red Campaign to Crush White Terror'.

157. Diminishing local support is illustrated in the immediate aftermath of the EPRP's assassination of Keftegna 1, Kebele 03 chairwoman Yeshoalul Mengistu. Absence of popular support for the EPRP's assassins meant that locals assisted in their capture, leading to their execution. Cf. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 29 March 2012; *Ethiopian Herald*, 15 May 1977, 'Funeral Services held for Late Co. Yeshoalul'.

158. Interview, Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012.

## Foreign war and domestic repression

The Somali invasion of Ethiopia in July 1977 proved an unexpected turning point in the history of the urban Terror. The Derg had long anticipated that in addition to armed rebellion within the country - most notably rural insurgencies in Eritrea, Tigray and Gonder as well as in the urban conflict with the civilian opposition - it was soon to face war with its bellicose neighbours. As late as April 1977, the Derg regarded Sudan as an immediate threat;<sup>159</sup> this perspective had been carefully encouraged by the Soviet Union, which provided Mengistu with a steady supply of KGB-forged documents suggesting Sudanese war plans.<sup>160</sup> But it was Somalia that sought to exploit Ethiopia's fragile internal situation for its own irredentist project. Since Siad Barre's rise to power in 1969, Somalia had supported the guerrilla insurgents of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), who operated in the Ogaden. Following months during which the rebels were increasingly reinforced by regular Somali troops, Somalia openly invaded Ethiopia on 13 July 1977. The broad contours of the subsequent war have been well documented,<sup>161</sup> although important gaps in the conflict's historiography remain.<sup>162</sup>

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159. Thomas L.Kane Collection, Library of Congress, 'PMAC Chairman Comrade Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile-Mariam's Address to the nation on the acts of aggression committed against Ethiopia through foreign intervention' (Addis Ababa, 12 April 1977); for an even later suggestion of an impending Sudanese attack, see *Ethiopian Herald*, 10 June 1977, 'Bulgaria Condemns Imperialist Actions Against Ethiopia'.

160. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: the KGB and the world* (Allen Lane: London, 2005), 432-7.

161. See especially Piero Gleijeses, 'Moscow's proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975-1988', in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol.8, no.2 (2006), 3-51; Marina Ottaway, *Soviet and American Influence in the Horn of Africa* (Holt Saunders: Eastbourne, 1982); Robert Patman, *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa: The Diplomacy of Intervention and Disengagement* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007).

162. Most notably, the war's social history and regional consequences remain insufficiently understood. The only study investigating its local dynamics is Gebru Tareke, 'The Ethiopian-Somali war of 1977 revisited', in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 33, iii (2000), 635-67.

Somalia's invasion raised serious questions concerning the survival of the Derg, and indeed of the Ethiopian state itself in its contemporary form. By September, Somali forces took Jijiga and the strategically important Karamara Pass.<sup>163</sup> At the same time, it transpired that Siad Barre's territorial designs exceeded the primarily Somali-inhabited parts of Ethiopia. Somalia's gains were short-lived, however. They would soon be reversed through the largest military intervention in Africa by the socialist bloc in the history of the Cold War. The Soviet Union airlifted military hardware worth more than a billion US dollars to Ethiopia, while Cuba sent 16,000 soldiers, accompanied by several hundred South Yemeni troops. This intervention and cooperation would not only change the course of the war; it would also define the third and final stage of the Ethiopian Terror.

At the dawn of the war, though, such intervention still belonged to an uncertain future. It was the Derg's own internal response to Somalia's invasion that shaped the end of the Terror's second phase, hitherto defined by decentralised collective violence. This response consisted of three interwoven strands: firstly, a renewed nationalist fervour; secondly, an extensive mobilisation campaign; and finally, a concerted drive to augment internal control. Together, these responses began to erode the decentralised exercise of the state's means of violence that defined the era of the *netsa ermeja*, and initiated the transition to the final stage of the urban Terror.<sup>164</sup>

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163. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 219.

164. The term *netsa ermeja* was most widely used between May and July 1977. Whilst the term occasionally occurs in government correspondence as a term for revolutionary violence into 1978, it is here used in its more precisely defined sense to denote the highly decentralised violence that preceded the Somali invasion.

As so often in Ethiopian history, the existential threat of foreign invasion gave rise to an upsurge of Ethiopian patriotism and nationalist sentiment.<sup>165</sup> The Derg partly responded to, partly kindled this patriotism by reviving its early self-representation as the champion of Ethiopian nationalism. Since April 1976, the radical ideologues within POMOA had shifted the emphasis towards a Marxist rhetoric. But in the wake of interstate war, the regime renewed the primacy of nationalist discourse.<sup>166</sup> Demands for ideological allegiance were relaxed. Senior figures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders began to regularly appear alongside Mengistu Haile Mariam at popular rallies. Orthodox Christian culture in particular was appropriated by the regime as an instrument of national unity. The Church was instrumentalised for mobilising purposes to the point of constituting "virtually an arm of the revolutionary state".<sup>167</sup> Ideological principles were even more widely renounced for the sake of national security, as a number of high-ranking military officers of the *ancien régime* were freed and reinstated in positions of leadership in order to strengthen the armed forces.<sup>168</sup>

Widely perceived as the defender of the nation, the Derg gained an unprecedented degree of domestic support and legitimacy as Somali tanks rolled into the Ogaden. Popular support aided the Derg's extensive mobilisation efforts, spearheaded by ubiquitous rallies and an intensive media campaign under the heading of the "Call of

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165. See the discussion of this rise in patriotism in FCO 31/2082-206, EAD's Rosling's report on meeting with Post and Henze of the US State Department, 19 September 1977. For historical parallels, see Marcus, 'Continuities in Ethiopian foreign policy', 129.

166. On the links between Marxism and Nationalism in the Derg's ideology, see Markakis, 'Nationalism and marxism in the Horn of Africa', 135.

167. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 142-3.

168. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution', 95.

the Revolutionary Motherland".<sup>169</sup> Peasant militias were hastily formed and trained, although their armaments and range of operation never attained to the vast popular armed force envisioned by Meison.<sup>170</sup> Encouraged by the nationalist mood and by widespread support for its mobilisation efforts, the Derg sought to establish greater control over the urban centres. In order to achieve this, the state's means of violence needed to be brought under greater centralised supervision and the civilian opposition needed to be further curbed.

In conferring new-found domestic legitimacy on the Derg, the Somali invasion facilitated the developing campaign against the regime's urban opponents. In the context of foreign aggression, the Derg was able to blur the distinction between external and internal enemies.<sup>171</sup> Government media associated all domestic opposition with the Somali invaders, a task made easier by the EPRP's failure to strongly condemn the foreign invasion. Similarly blurred was the distinction between regime and state: in a radical accentuation of earlier trends to cast opposition as "anarchists", dissidents were represented not as opponents of the Derg and its revolution, but rather as unpatriotic enemies of the state.<sup>172</sup> The need to defend the integrity of Ethiopia would be used as a justification for repression for months to come, climaxing in the official Red Terror of late 1977.<sup>173</sup>

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169. Government dailies had a section of their front-page devoted to the "Call of the Revolutionary Motherland" from the beginning of May 1977. From the outset, the media campaign combined calls for the defense of territorial integrity with encouragements to denounce internal opponents. See e.g. *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 May 1977, 'Call of Motherland: to defend the frontiers, to protect the revolution and to increase production'.

170. Interviews, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011 and Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012; cf. Lefort, *Heretical Revolution*, 222.

171. Cf. the comparative discussion in Mazower, 'Violence and the state', 1170.

172. FCO 31/2083-247, EAD Briefing on the Horn of Africa, 3 October 1977.

173. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian revolution', 41-2.



League in February of 1977, where he had been involved in menial operational tasks such as "acquiring red fabric, paper and other accessories for propaganda purposes". During a raid on his house on 24 July 1977, Shewatatek attempted to escape but was shot in the left arm, which was "badly mangled" as a result, and arrested. When interrogated, Shewatatek admitted to his Youth League membership but denied participating in the EPRP's assassination campaign. His interrogators felt little empathy for him. "Taking care of him in hospital would be squandering valuable assets on a useless counter-revolutionary", they argued; instead "action should be taken on him". The suggestion was endorsed by the Secretariat of the 'Public Security Committee', subject to there having been a witness against Shewatatek leading to his arrest.

The same report informs us about the similar circumstances in which Tesfaye Lulu Mengesha, another young and low-key opposition activist, was executed. A high school student who had joined the EPRP's Youth League during the early stages of violent confrontation with the regime, 22 year old Tesfaye was admitted to Yekatit '12 Hospital with a bullet wound to his thigh on 4 July 1977. How he received the wound does not emerge from the report. After he spent three weeks in hospital, "wasting valuable resources and medication that would have otherwise been used to help those who were spilling their blood for the motherland", Tesfaye was transferred to Makelawi prison. Under torture, he there admitted to "counter-revolutionary activities like [printing] red fabric signs, pamphlet distribution and contributing 2 birr every month to the [EPRP's] cause", but denied membership in the EPRP's assassination squads. Undeterred, his interrogators argued that, in light of a testimony concerning Tesfaye's participation in such squads extracted from another informant named Worku Teshome, "a thorough interrogation" would certainly "make him admit". Since such interrogation was

rendered difficult by Tesfaye's persisting bullet wound, they argued, the testimony against him should be deemed "sufficient to warrant a decision that immediate action be taken on this counter-revolutionary." A hand-written note on the sidebar of the report - "take action" - indicates Tesfaye's fate.

Both cases illustrate the establishment of greater centralised control over the local exercise of violence. This shift signalled the arrival of a new phase in the history of the Ethiopian Terror, which would come into its own with the marginalisation and eventual elimination of Meison by August 1977. Through its emphasis on grassroots empowerment, Meison's "critical support" for the Derg had shaped many of the decisive dynamics of the second phase of the Terror. The organisation had stood directly behind pivotal policies that defined this phase: it was Meison that had argued for the establishment of *Abyot Tebeka* squads in the Kebeles.<sup>177</sup> It was Meison that had persistently called for civilians to be armed.<sup>178</sup> It was Meison's Negede Gobeze who had originally coined the slogan that in many ways defined this phase: "the revolution has passed from the defensive to the offensive".<sup>179</sup> And it was Meison that had advocated the *netsa ermeja* and promoted the framework within which it could unfold.<sup>180</sup> Throughout their time in government, Meison members had been a force for local empowerment and decentralisation, balancing the Derg's opposite inclinations. When Meison went underground in August 1977, this balance was severed; the urban Terror entered into a new phase.

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177. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 19, fn. 60.

178. For the latest example of this, see *YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.47, 11 Nehase 1969 E.C. [17 August 1977].

179. Tesfaye Mekonnen ይድረስ ለባለታሪኩ, 230.

180. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 26.

## Chapter 4 - States of Exception and Normality

### The bureaucratisation of collective violence, from July 1977

The third and final phase of the Ethiopian Terror was also its bloodiest. In the aftermath of the Somali invasion of July 1977, a newly emboldened Derg systematically pursued first a monopolisation, then an institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of the urban Terror. The marginalisation of the once indispensable Meison gave way to its open repression. Other potentially independent actors within the government were similarly purged in the closing months of 1977, including the vice-chairman of the Derg, Atnafu Abate. Ties to socialist-bloc allies were exploited to overhaul and expand the regime's security apparatus. The German Democratic Republic in particular was instrumental in developing the regime's intelligence services, an important facet of the Ethiopian Terror that has received scarce attention to date. With improved security capacities, the Derg increasingly took charge of the violence in the capital, normalising and bureaucratising its practices.

This process of bureaucratising violence was not linear; pockets of decentralised Terror continued to emerge and develop into early 1978. In contrast to the earlier *netsa ermeja*, however, the regime now sought to actively control these, and Kebele leaders who were regarded as too independent were routinely purged; autonomy in the execution of 'revolutionary measures' ceased to be valued. The climax of Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence came in the closing months of 1977, when the Derg launched its official 'Red Terror' campaign. Addis Ababa was plastered with posters

advocating the need to intensify the Terror; dead bodies of alleged counter-revolutionaries were widely displayed on the streets, bearing placards inscribed with pro-regime slogans.

The period of the officially proclaimed Red Terror stretched into 1978. It was defined by highly public expressions of revolutionary violence, which became more selective in nature than had hitherto been the case. The regime's near-hegemonic control over the urban sphere combined with a faltering but still extant threat from the civilian opposition to give the Derg both the capacity and the incentive to pursue its deadly campaign. The Red Terror's selective violence depended on local information and popular collaboration; both now became readily forthcoming, since the EPRP had lost its popular appeal and opposing it no longer carried a threat of counter-denunciation. Concomitantly, the space for neutrality afforded to ordinary citizens shrank even further.

Prisons had been prominent sites of the Ethiopian Terror since its onset in 1976. During the official Red Terror of 1977 and 1978 they developed into "the epicentre"<sup>1</sup> of urban abuse and violence. They also became the means by which the Terror was gradually taken off the streets and receded from public view. In the course of 1978 revolutionary violence in the capital became less overt, with torture and executions behind prison walls persisting while the open violence of the Red Terror ebbed off.

To observers, the decrease in overt violence signalled the end of the Ethiopian Terror. The urban civilian challenge to the regime was recognised to have collapsed.<sup>2</sup>

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1. de Waal, 'A permanent Human Rights memorial', 156.

2. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 57; cf. FCO 21-2257-34, Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, 3 May 1978.

Amnesty International even declared Addis Ababa one of the safest cities in Africa.<sup>3</sup> The Terror, however, did not simply end in 1978. Instead, it was internalised by the urban society that had suffered through it; institutionalised in a state apparatus that had shaped the violence while itself being altered by it; and inscribed into the structure of state-society relations for decades to come. The extended state of emergency that attended the Red Terror altered expectations and practices of the urban everyday, fashioning a new sense of normality. In more ways than one, the Terror did not end in 1978.

Engaging geopolitical contexts, national politics and local dynamics, this chapter develops a narrative of this final phase of the Ethiopian Terror. It thereby inquires into the phase's social and political patterns, and examines how its violence was internalised and bureaucratised, shaping the trajectory of the Terror's legacies. Some aspects of this narrative, such as the elimination of Meison, can draw on and engage with a comparatively mature historiography. Others - including the role of East German agents in the Terror, reconstructed from the State Security archives in Berlin - remain understudied and barely known. Most significant for the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution, however, is the principal argument developed throughout this chapter: that the gradual reassertion of government control over the urban Terror entailed a bureaucratisation of violence, whereby the practices and structures of the state of exception<sup>4</sup> were normalised and inscribed into the institutional working of the Ethiopian

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3. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

4. Cf. the comparative discussion in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 2008), *passim*.

state.<sup>5</sup> This process came to define subsequent state-society relations, casting a long shadow over urban Ethiopia beyond the demise of the Derg. In the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution, a persisting lack of attention to the closing stages of the Terror has obscured our understanding of dynamics and legacies of revolutionary violence.<sup>6</sup> This chapter begins to address these deficiencies.

### **Monopolising the Terror: eliminating Meison, purging dissent**

Through its offer of "critical support", Meison had played a decisive role in defining the early Derg. The shift towards the language of scientific socialism, the development of the regime's radical faction around Mengistu Haile Mariam and its initiatives in local administration and mobilisation were all linked to the alliance with Meison.<sup>7</sup> By March 1977, however, cracks in the relations between the Derg and its civilian ally began to appear. Having built Mengistu's political platform and helped in establishing his power, Meison now became dispensable. Its expendability was compounded by the development of *Abyotawi Seded* ['Revolutionary Torch'], a party composed of Mengistu's sycophants. Founded in 1976 under the leadership of Mengistu's right-hand man Legesse Asfaw, Seded was from the beginning intended to balance the power of

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5. States of exception have long persisted in the militarised peripheries of the Ethiopian state, such as the Sudanese borderlands or the Ogaden. In the urban centres of state power, this bureaucratisation of violence was a new and defining phenomenon.

6. See for example the silence on the end of the Terror in Bahru Zewde, 'The History of the Red Terror', 28.

7. See especially Andargachew Assegid, በአዲስ የተቀረጠ ረጅም ጉዞ and Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', passim.

Meison within POMOA and the Kebeles.<sup>8</sup> When 'Imaledh' [the 'Union of Marxist-Leninist Organisations of Ethiopia'] was established in late February 1977, comprising all legal political organisations and charged to lay the plans for a vanguard worker's party, Seded was tasked to ensure that such a party would civilianise, rather than challenge, military rule. The rise of Seded instigated the marginalisation of Meison, causing hesitations among the latter's leadership about its policy of 'critical support'.

For the Derg, Meison increasingly represented a liability, even a threat. Successive purges of dissenters had made Meison the last relatively independent organisation within government. It was no secret that Meison regarded the Derg's leadership of the revolution as a mere temporary necessity, to be phased out once the population was sufficiently politicised and organised.<sup>9</sup> The military regime further feared that Meison was using the drive to arm the urban civilian population in order to militarise its own following; the campaign was partially suspended as a result by April 1977.<sup>10</sup> Similar apprehension led the Derg to only partially implement Meison's suggestion of establishing local peasant militias in order to face the growing Somali threat.<sup>11</sup> Yeraswork Admassie suggests that a strong show of popular support for Meison at the 1977 May Day demonstrations, mere days after the massacres of EPRP supporters, exacerbated tensions with the Derg. Smaller political organisations within POMOA and Imaledh were warning the regime that Meison was becoming "a political elephant."<sup>12</sup>

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8. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 67-9, 272; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 133.

9. Dawit Shifaw, *The Diary of Terror: Ethiopia 1974 to 1991* (Trafford Publishers: Bloomington, 2012), 67.

10. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 29.

11. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

12. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

In the wake of the Somali invasion, selective purges of prominent Meison members began to take the place of the political marginalisation hitherto pursued by the Derg. For Meison's leadership, fears of EPRP bullets were now augmented by the threat of killings commissioned by the Derg. A number of leading figures were killed in assassinations orchestrated by the Derg but officially ascribed to the EPRP. Perhaps the most noteworthy and least disputed of these cases was the assassination of Abdullahi Yusuf. Abdullahi had studied in Sweden, where he had been politicised and begun to support Meison. Upon his return to Ethiopia he rose to prominence within the organisation, soon becoming the head of the POMOA office in Hararghe. A Muslim and an Oromo, Abdullahi's power was resented and opposed by the Amhara settler elite in the region, whom he had sought to disarm and whose local hegemony he challenged. Clapham interprets this confrontation as the essential background to his murder,<sup>13</sup> but there was a less local impulse behind it.

As Somalia invaded in July 1977, Abdullahi was temporarily moved to Addis Ababa to teach at the Yekatit '66 Political School. The placement appears to have been intended to remove Abdullahi from his position of power in Hararghe, where both his regionalist sympathies and his membership in Meison were by now making him suspect to the Derg. But his appointment in the capital was not to last long: when leaving the Political School in early August his car was followed by another vehicle, from which suspected Derg members opened fire near Minilik's palace. Abdullahi Yusuf died

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13. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 203.

instantly, as did a civilian hit by his swerving car. The evening television news blamed the attack on the EPRP.<sup>14</sup>

The practice of attributing regime-orchestrated assassinations to opposition activities would continue throughout the duration of the Terror. A degree of uncertainty necessarily surrounds the sponsors of such killings, but many cases are widely suspected to have been carried out by the Derg. Thus in September 1977 Temesgen Madebo, chairman of the All Ethiopia Trade Union and formerly a prominent Meison members, was assassinated outside his office. In a late show of support for Meison and of defiance to the Derg, crowds at his funeral chanted that "not all assassins belong to the EPRP".<sup>15</sup> On 2 November 1977 Guta Sernesa, the mayor-elect of Addis Ababa, was shot in public.<sup>16</sup> The assassination was ascribed to the EPRP, "which had no knowledge of it".<sup>17</sup> In March 1978, Kiflu Worku, a leading Seded member and formerly the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence, was killed in a carbon copy of Abdullahi Yusuf's murder: "He was driving [...] when another car with two or three occupants came alongside him and opened fire. He died immediately and his car swerved off the road."<sup>18</sup> The British Embassy assumed the killing to be the work of the Derg.

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14. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011; see also Merera Gudina, 'Party politics, political polarization and the future of Ethiopian democracy', unpublished paper presented at the International Conference of Ethiopian Development Studies (Western Michigan University: Kalamazoo, 2007), fn. 16.

15. Whether or not Temesgen Madebo was assassinated by the EPRP remains unclear. Kiflu Tadesse suggested that he was in *The Generation Part II*, 145-8, 274; when asked about this, Kiflu acknowledged that, despite the EPRP's grievances against Temesgen, he was not certain who had carried out the assassination and noted that the late date raises questions about EPRP involvement: interview, 6 January 2012.

Konjit Teklu claims to have been party to an armed confrontation involving an EPRP squad in which Temesgen was killed, but neither the date nor the circumstances of his death are accurate: *Surviving the Red Terror*, 5-6.

16. *Valley News*, 4 November 1977, 'Two Ethiopian officials slain by hired gunmen'.

17. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 239, 285.

18. FCO 31/2257-17, Embassy Report to EAD, 18 March 1978.

Among Meison members, the uncertainty generated by the multifarious assassinations was amplified by rumours concerning impending purges. As early as April 1977, rumours had circulated that Meison's Haile Fida was to be imminently arrested.<sup>19</sup> By July, the rumours suggested a comprehensive purge of Meison's leadership.<sup>20</sup> The Somali invasion had brought simmering tensions between the organisation and the Derg to a boiling point. Meison leaders began to make hurried plans to transform their organisation into an underground resistance movement.

In a "move of desperation",<sup>21</sup> a large part of Meison's leadership went underground on 19 August 1977. Preparations were extremely short and secretive: Yeraswork Admassie remembers not even telling his wife of the planned move underground.<sup>22</sup> On short orders, leading members left the cities for rural areas like Wellega in which Meison enjoyed stronger local support.<sup>23</sup> It was in those areas that the regime's short but intense efforts to eradicate the organisation became most violent. Thus in Wellega, central orders were to kill rather than to arrest Meison members. Such orders notwithstanding, in the following months "prisons were overcrowded with Meison members and sympathizers."<sup>24</sup> Leaders of the organisation were gradually arrested, either in the field or upon attempting to return to Addis Ababa to re-establish contacts. Only very few, including Negede Gobeze, succeeded in evading arrest and fleeing the

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19. Dawit Shifaw, *The Diary of Terror*, 65.

20. Interviews, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2011 and Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

21. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

22. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

23. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

24. Etana Habte, 'Administration of Wallagga under the Dergue, 1974-1991', MA Dissertation in History, Addis Ababa University (2007), 77.

country.<sup>25</sup> Prominent leaders like Haile Fida, Desta Tadesse and Hailu Gerbaba, as well as the heads of Meison's women's organisation in Nigist Adane and Konjit Kebede, were taken to Addis Ababa's notorious prisons, whence they would "disappear" in the following years.<sup>26</sup>

As Meison went underground and was denounced by the Derg as *qegn mengedegna* [broadly translatable as a 'right-wing organisation'], many ordinary members of the organisation switched allegiance to the Derg, opting to maintain their jobs and everyday life.<sup>27</sup> Over the following months, many of these former Meison members were removed from governmental positions, and some were arrested.<sup>28</sup> A small number of defectors, including the soon-to-be mayor of Addis Ababa Alemu Abebe, founded a new organisation called *Qey Fana* ['Red Lamp'] to little effect. Seded, meanwhile, effectively appropriated the institutional roles hitherto held by Meison.<sup>29</sup>

Meison's removal spelled an end to remaining balances of power within the government, and hence a further step towards totalitarianism.<sup>30</sup> The remaining legal parties carried little power. Oromo-dominated Ichat went underground in late 1977, and largely dissolved into the ethno-nationalist Oromo struggle. Malerid and Wez League survived for longer, but became increasingly insignificant until they were eventually

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25. Negede recalls that in retaliation for his escape, three of his sisters were imprisoned. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

26. Amnesty International, AI 24/05/80, 22 April 1980.

27. Andargachew Assegid, *በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ*, 425-6; Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 33; cf. Yeraswork Admassie's witness statement in SPO, *ክፍል ሁለት: የፌዴራል ክፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ* ['Part Two: The Verdict Given by the Federal High Court'] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 1999 E.C. [2007]), 41-3.

28. Archiv des Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes [Stasi Archive in Berlin, henceforth BStU] MfS HA IX 10020, Report on Relations between GDR and Ethiopia, date missing (early 1978?), 129.

29. FCO 31/2083-247, EAD briefing on the Horn, 3 October 1977.

30. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 239-40; cf. the theoretical discussion on power balances, collective violence and totalitarianism in Barrington Moore, 'The impact and function of terror' in Catherine Besteman. *Violence: A Reader* (New York University Press: New York, 2002), 63.

dissolved in 1979.<sup>31</sup> For the Derg, the final obstacles towards emulating other African military regimes in civilianising their rule were being cleared. Meison members who had gone underground, meanwhile, began to experience the Terror that had hitherto been directed primarily towards suspected members and sympathisers of the EPRP. Yet they were not alone in suddenly finding themselves as targets of the Derg's revolutionary violence. In October 1977, an East German secret service report noted that "Mengistu has recently been making efforts to decrease diversities of opinion among the progressive forces of the government". Atnafu Abate in particular was identified as a rallying point of "unreliable elements" within the Derg, of whom it needed to be cleansed.<sup>32</sup> On 13 November, Atnafu Abate was executed, officially for "anti-revolutionary crimes committed against the Ethiopian people" and for manifesting "arch-reactionary stands" at a Derg meeting.<sup>33</sup> The purging of dissenters concentrated all state power in the small leading faction around Mengistu Haile Mariam.

### **East German assistance and the development of the Derg's security apparatus**

As Ethiopia's revolutionary violence was brought under stronger regime control, the security services came to play an increasingly prominent role. During the final phase of the urban Terror, the Derg's security apparatus underwent important developments in both structure and capacity. Changes to security and intelligence units had already been

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31. Bereket Habte Selassie, 'The Dergue's dilemma: the legacies of a feudal empire' in *Monthly Review*, vol.32, no.3 (July-August 1980), 19.

32. BStU HVA 87, Information on Questions concerning Developments in Ethiopia, 24 October 1977, 57-9. All translations from the original German documents are my own.

33. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 33; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 247.

introduced earlier in 1977. Relations between different wings of the security apparatus had been reconfigured, and the mandate of Derg's own Investigation Unit had been expanded "in order to take every measure to decimate any opposition".<sup>34</sup> But it was only in the context of the globalised war with Somalia that the security services became a defining force in the Ethiopian Terror. Integral to these developments was the outside assistance received from socialist bloc allies, most notably East Germany.

Until the second half of 1977, international actors had played merely marginal roles in Ethiopia's unfolding urban violence. The global Cold War had provided an important background theme to the emerging Terror, and at times had intersected with local actions in a number of ways: anti-American rhetoric was a constant feature of the revolutionary process;<sup>35</sup> the Derg had become increasingly concerned with securing international patronage and alliances;<sup>36</sup> some Meison members, who later defected to Qey Fana, are said to have worked for the KGB;<sup>37</sup> and discussions over the revolutionary or imperialist credentials of the Soviet Union had been a constant feature of debates within the civilian left.<sup>38</sup> The Cold War thus constituted a constant backdrop to the unfolding revolutionary violence. But during the Terror's first two phases, it never became a decisive factor in the making of this violence. International Cold War actors

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34. SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 37. For a detailed discussion of the structure of the Derg's security apparatus, see SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, ch.1.

35. For first hand experiences of such sentiments, see Tim Bascom, *Chameleon Days: An American Boyhood in Ethiopia* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 2006); Klein, *Through Ferrengi Eyes*, 9. The US had kept supporting Ethiopia until early 1977. With their station at Kagnev losing its strategic significance, British sources suggest that the Carter Administration used Ethiopia's human rights record as a "convenient and low-cost" way of withdrawing US support: FCO 31/2080-72, Embassy report from Washington, D.C., 23 March 1977.

36. Westad, *The Global Cold War*, ch.7.

37. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

38. Abera Yemane Ab also suggests that the Soviet Union played a decisive role in alienating the Derg from Meison in early 1977, but does not produce any sources to support the claim: Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 96-8.

took little direct influence on local events, and international agendas did not directly shape the unfolding Terror.

This changed dramatically in the wake of the Somali invasion of the Ogaden in July 1977. Suddenly, the region became the focal point of the global Cold War. The Soviet Union's air- and seairlift of more than a billion dollars' worth of military hardware to Ethiopia following its about-turn in patronage relations in the Horn of Africa has received much attention in the historiography of the Cold War.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the deployment of approximately 16,000 Cuban troops has been discussed,<sup>40</sup> although Gleijeses remains the only historian to have been given access to Cuban archives;<sup>41</sup> a history of the Cuban presence and experience in Ethiopia is yet to be written. Soviet military support provided the Derg with renewed strength and confidence that may have affected its actions in the urban Terror, but there was little direct impact: military hardware was tied down in the Ogaden until March 1978 and then swiftly moved north to confront the burgeoning insurgencies in Eritrea and Tigray. Cuban soldiers, meanwhile, were under strict instructions to limit their operations to the Ogaden.<sup>42</sup>

By contrast, East German support very directly impacted on the ongoing urban Terror. To date, such East German involvement in Ethiopia has received little scholarly attention. Döring's remains the most comprehensive analysis of East German relations

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39. See especially Ottaway, *Soviet and American Influence in the Horn*; Patman, *The Soviet Union in the Horn of Africa*; Westad, *The Global Cold War*.

40. See especially William LeoGrande, *Cuba's Policy in Africa, 1959-1980* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1980).

41. Piero Gleijeses, 'Moscow's proxy? Cuba and Africa, 1975-1988', in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol.8, no.2 (2006), 13, fn. 27 notes that even Gleijeses only saw three files on Cuban involvement in the Ogaden, with most documents remaining in sealed boxes.

42. Gleijeses, 'Moscow's proxy?', 15.

with the Derg,<sup>43</sup> whereas Haile Gabriel Dagne is the only one to have approached these international ties on the basis of Ethiopian source materials.<sup>44</sup> East German State Security ['Stasi'] sources on the Ethiopian Terror have hitherto only been examined in an introductory essay by Toni Weis.<sup>45</sup> This essay provides a valuable overview of the archive's densities and limitations, but does not contextualise its materials in the local dynamics of Ethiopia's urban violence. Such contextualised analysis of the Stasi archive is the task of the following section.

Ties between East Germany and the Derg soon deepened in the aftermath of Mengistu's rise to power in February 1977. By April, the German Democratic Republic's first ambassador to Ethiopia was accredited.<sup>46</sup> Within a week of the Somali invasion in July, East Germany became the first socialist country to provide the Derg with munitions, albeit on a comparatively small scale.<sup>47</sup> Soon, more than half of Ethiopia's agricultural machinery was 'made in GDR', and even a number of schoolbooks were written by East Germans seeking to "politicise Ethiopia's masses".<sup>48</sup>

More significant for the urban Terror were the connections established between the East German secret services and Ethiopia's security apparatus. A retrospective Stasi report on this co-operation from 1986 notes that these connections had been established at the behest of the Ethiopian leadership in 1977, and that "due to the tense and

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43. Hans-Joachim Döring, *"Es geht um unsere Existenz": Die Politik der DDR gegenüber der Dritten Welt am Beispiel von Mosambik und Äthiopien* (Ch. Links Verlag: Berlin, 1999).

44. Haile Gabriel Dagne, *The Commitment of the German Democratic Republic in Ethiopia* (Lit: Berlin, 2006).

45. Weis, 'Handcuffs for Operation Friendship', 81-87. I am grateful to Toni for sharing the notes and reflections behind his study, which first alerted me to the import of the BStU archives.

46. BStU MfS HA IX 10020, Report on relations between GDR and Ethiopia (early 1978?), 123.

47. BStU MfS BCD 2804, Shipment List, 22 July 1977; cf. Weis, 'Handcuffs for Operation Friendship', 86.

48. FCO 31/2257-15, Embassy report on revolution and terror in Addis Ababa., 13 March 1978.

complicated situation in Ethiopia in the years 1978 and 1979 [these ties] have been very intensive and far-reaching."<sup>49</sup> For the unfolding urban Terror, they proved far-reaching indeed. Already in August 1977, the East German Ministry for State Security sent espionage and interrogation materials worth over 220,000 US dollars to the Derg's Investigation Department. In a letter confirming the delivery, German minister Mielke assured the Derg's Teka Tulu that that the cost of these materials would be covered "as an expression of solidarity by my Ministry's staff towards your revolution."<sup>50</sup> In November, further information technology ['Nachrichtentechnik']<sup>51</sup> was sent in order to expand the capacity of Ethiopia's intelligence units.<sup>52</sup>

With the espionage and interrogation material came a commitment to providing training for Ethiopia's security services and comprehensive advice on the services' structure and operations.<sup>53</sup> Such training and advice comprised both military and internal intelligence. In September 1977 for instance, East German agents ran a training course on military espionage in Awasa as a contribution to the Ethiopian war effort.<sup>54</sup> With regard to internal service capabilities, East German State Security advice focused on the identification of foundational weaknesses in Ethiopia's secret services and on the provision of hardware, training and structural recommendations designed to address these. The absence of clear communication between branches of the security apparatus

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49. BStU MfS Abteilung X 91, Dispatch on the development of further co-operation, May 1986, 179.

50. BStU MfS Abteilung X 91, Letter from E. Mielke to Take Tulu, November 1977, 282.

51. While the report does not clarify what this information technology precisely consisted of, the context suggests that these were primarily devices designed for the interception of telephone and radio communication.

52. BStU MfS Abteilung X 91, MfS Report to Mielke, 28 October 1977, 280.

53. BStU MfS Abteilung X 91. Additional cooperation agreement, [file incomplete and date missing] (late 1977), 347.

54. BStU MfS Arbeitsbereich Neiber 21, 'Bericht zum Aufenthalt einer Delegation des MfS in Addis Abeba' ['Report on the stay of a MfS delegation in Addis Ababa'], 27 September 1977, 59.

and the lack of modern technology were regarded as the most pressing obstacles to more effective operations. The former stemmed from Haile Selassie's policy of making separate services work "next to and against" one another,<sup>55</sup> serving centralised control but limiting coherence and efficiency. The Derg worked closely with East German advisors in its successive restructuring of the security apparatus in 1977, 1979 and 1987.

The Stasi also provided support by sending "advisors, lecturers and specialists, especially on the areas of intelligence, of counter-espionage [...], of the contravening of political and economic underground activities [and of] interrogation."<sup>56</sup> In other words, East Germany's secret services trained their Ethiopian counterparts in how to combat and control its opponents more effectively in the context of the urban Terror. The effects of this training were soon felt on the ground. EPRP activists found their phones tapped, their comrades disappearing, infiltrators in Derg organisations exposed and remaining cells dissolved as a result of the Derg's greater intelligence capabilities.<sup>57</sup>

Between October 1977 and February 1978, the Stasi stationed three agents with Ethiopian secret services.<sup>58</sup> Their final report reflects on their work of training Ethiopian agents in surveillance and radio communications and tells of close ties to Kebele guards, who were left in the dark concerning their mission but entrusted with their protection. It also hints at health problems, possibly induced by local food, and indicates domestic trouble upon their return since information provided to their wives

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55. MfS Arbeitsbereich Neiber 21, 'Bericht zum Aufenthalt einer Delegation des MfS in Addis Abeba' ['Report on the stay of a MfS delegation in Addis Ababa'], 27 September 1977, 62.

56. BStU MfS Abteilung X 91, Additional cooperation agreement, file incomplete and date missing (late 1977), 347.

57. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 228,324.

58. BStU MfS Arbeitsbereich Neiber 21, Report on completed operation in Addis Ababa, 3 March 1978, 43-5.

had been minimal. An internal report of the Derg's Investigation Department, written by Major Berhanu Kebede, emphasised the contribution of these East German "comrades" in training his personnel and facilitating "an expanded focus on hunting down and eliminating all counter-revolutionaries".<sup>59</sup> There appears to be no evidence that these agents participated directly in interrogations or other explicitly violent acts, a point which holds true for East German support of the Derg as a whole.<sup>60</sup> It was through the equipment, training and advice provided to the Derg's security apparatus that East Germany influenced the Ethiopian Terror.

In the long term, the result of such support was a radical restructuring of Ethiopia's intelligence units, by 1979 coordinated by a redesigned Ministry for National and Public Security and bolstered by an additional East German delivery of weapons and investigation tools worth three million Marks.<sup>61</sup> This assistance continued for the following decade, climaxing in a contribution of four million Marks for fundamental improvements to the Ministry's capacities in 1987.<sup>62</sup> More immediately, developments to the Derg's security apparatus meant that its official proclamation of 'Red Terror' occurred in the context of much improved state capacity for local control and coercion. As a report to Erich Honecker in October 1977 noted, "the situation in Ethiopia and the position of the Derg has stabilised".<sup>63</sup> This was ascribed to greater local collaboration

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59. See the internal report by Major Berhanu Kebede, 22 July 1978, in SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶላ**, 34-5.

60. Weis, 'Handcuffs for Operation Friendship', 84. In 2006, Ulrich Schmid published the novel *Aschemenschen*, in which a protagonist unveils his past as a Stasi agent who tortured and murdered in the Ethiopian Terror. The novel brought the Terror and the Stasi's role in it to public attention in the German-speaking world, causing heated discussions in the broadcasting media. Its claims of direct German involvement in the torture and killings of the Ethiopian Terror remain unsubstantiated.

61. BStU MfS BCD 2804, Procurement and supply list, date missing (late 1979?).

62. BStU , MfS HA IX 20122, MfS Letter to Tesfaye Woldeselassie, 2 June 1987.

63. BStU HVA 87, Information on questions concerning developments in Ethiopia, 24 October 1977, 57.

with the Derg as well as to "the many arrests and executions of counter-revolutionary forces through the Ethiopian security organs." These processes were about to reach their climax in the Derg's Red Terror.

### **"Let the Red Terror intensify": organised mass violence as official state policy**

With a strengthened security apparatus and increasing centralised control over local administrations, the regime launched a decisive operation against its remaining urban opponents in October 1977. This was the officially declared Red Terror, the climax of Ethiopia's urban violence. Marking a turning point in the war with Somalia, the month of October provided the regime with an opportunity to refocus on its urban opponents. The first Soviet arms, including aircraft and tanks, became available and combined with Ethiopian and Southern Yemeni reinforcements to halt the Somali advance.<sup>64</sup> Socialist bloc support for Ethiopia was crystallising, and by the end of the month Soviet willingness to intervene more decisively on the Ethiopian side was public knowledge.<sup>65</sup> The tide in the Ogaden war had decisively turned in Ethiopia's favour. This shift had important repercussions for the urban Terror.

On 18 October, the Derg issued a statement condemning extant opposition groups and warning the population that "true revolutionaries will not conceal the enemy in their bosoms."<sup>66</sup> The statement was elaborated into a lengthy manifesto against the EPRP in

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64. Gebru Tareke, 'The Ethiopian-Somali war', 652

65. FBIS-SSA-77-205, 'President Siad Decries Soviet, Cuban Aid to Ethiopia', 25 October 1977; FBIS-SSA-77-206, 'Soviet Official Expresses Support for the Revolution', 26 October 1977.

66. FBIS-SSA-77-203, 'PMAC Statement Urges Struggle Against EPRP', 20 October 1977.

the following day's edition of the government daily *Addis Zemen*.<sup>67</sup> What may have appeared as a routine condemnation in fact marked the onset of a new regime offensive in Addis Ababa. In an address to the capital's Kebele leaders broadcast on 'Radio Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia', Major Legesse Asfaw decried the ongoing "counterrevolutionary activities being carried out in Addis Ababa" and declared that the revolution would henceforth follow a "path of Red Terror."<sup>68</sup> The travelling concept of Red Terror had circulated in revolutionary Ethiopia for over a year. Now, it became the official designation and justification for a regime policy of collective violence.

The Derg's Red Terror was predicated on the need to respond to existential threats emanating from counter-revolutionary groups, among which the EPRP remained foremost. Days after Major Legesse's declaration, an official radio broadcast announcing the execution of eight EPRP sympathisers described the party as "a group of hired counterrevolutionary assassins", in league with "imperialist friends who take care of them."<sup>69</sup> Such statements were not new, and they conveyed very little about the EPRP's actual ties or capacity; they do, however, illustrate the Derg's resumed efforts to fan perceptions of an atrocity environment.

By this stage, the EPRP was a shadow of the well-structured organisation that had dominated urban Ethiopia during the first phase of the urban Terror. It continued to carry out targeted assassinations but the party's leadership, structure and assets were decimated. Internal conflict claimed much of the remaining focus and facilitated the leaking of information to the Derg.<sup>70</sup> The party retained numerous followers in the

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67. *Addis Zemen*, 9 Teqemt 1970 E.C. [19 October 1977].

68. FBIS-SSA-77-204, 'PMAC official calls for war on counter-revolutionaries' (20 October 1977).

69. FBIS-SSA-205, 'Eight "Counterrevolutionaries" Executed in Ethiopia', 25 October 1977.

70. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 325.

international Ethiopian student movement, who were under the false impression that "EPRA urban units have effectively rebuffed the fascist terror unleashed by the regime"<sup>71</sup> and that they were widely meting out debilitating "revolutionary trials" against Derg members and allies.<sup>72</sup> Reality on the ground was rather different. Improvements to the Derg's security apparatus prevented the party from regrouping following the setbacks experienced during the *netsa ermeja*.<sup>73</sup> EPRP members working within the Central Investigation Department, hitherto the primary source of intelligence concerning the regime's efforts against the party, had been arrested in July 1977.<sup>74</sup> This left members exposed to the Derg's increasingly advanced operations against underground activists. The EPRP's local members and sympathisers constituted the primary targets of the Red Terror, but the party found itself unable to offer protection or to coordinate its campaigns.

The result was the climax of revolutionary Ethiopia's state terror between October 1977 and April 1978. The EPRP continued to represent a sufficient security threat to motivate the launch of the regime's Red Terror. However, it no longer possessed the capacity to systematically retaliate against local regime informants and collaborators. For many urban residents, denunciations of underground activists promised potential rewards but carried little risk, and Kebele actors as well as branches of the Derg's security apparatus were willing to violently pursue local leads. In Kalyvas' terms, the

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71. *Forward! Newsletter of the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students*, vol.2, no.4 (January 1978), 4.

72. *Voice of the Militant Youth, Newsletter of the Ethiopian Students Union in Africa and the Middle-East (ESUAME), Member Union of WWFES* (November 1977).

73. In much the same way, Meison struggled to regroup in the aftermath of arrests and serial defections. For a narrative account of efforts to revive Meison, see Mekonnen Getu, *The Undreamt*, passim.

74. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 326.

operational demand for local information met its individual supply,<sup>75</sup> triggering local searches, arrests, interrogations and executions.

Local denunciations combined with information gathered in interrogations aimed at dismantling clandestine structures to fuel the Derg's Red Terror and to eradicate the urban opposition's organisational structures.<sup>76</sup> Concrete casualty figures remain elusive, but oral and archival sources concur in representing the collective violence carried out between October 1977 and the early months of 1978 as the deadliest of Ethiopia's urban Terror. One informant speaks for many in his generation when he recalls that during those months, "those friends of mine who passed away are more than the ones that were left".<sup>77</sup>

The Red Terror as an official government campaign was declared in October 1977. In the following months, Addis Ababa witnessed public displays and performances of violence on a scale unknown since the infamous Black Shirt massacres forty years earlier.<sup>78</sup> Large posters declaring *Qey Shibir Yifafam* ['Let the Red Terror intensify'] were "posted at every likely and unlikely place, in bright and psychedelic eye-catching colours".<sup>79</sup> Dead bodies were widely displayed on streets across the city, bearing placards with writings such as "this was a counter-revolutionary" or "we are tired of burying them".<sup>80</sup> The account of a scene witnessed close to the Black Lion Hospital by SIM missionary John Cumbers in January 1978 was brutally reproduced across the city:

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75. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 13.

76. Interrogations were focused on chains of recruitments in order to identify and uproot opposition cells and networks. See SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 33; cf. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

77. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

78. For a detailed account of the 1937 massacres, see Ian Campbell, *The Plot to kill Graziani: the attempted assassination of Mussolini's viceroy* (Addis Ababa University Press: Addis Ababa, 2010).

79. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 6.

80. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

"[In the morning] the crackle of an automatic rifle had me running to the open window of my office. I saw two men sprawled in the middle of the street. People were running in all directions, seeking cover in shops and houses. As the victims lay dying on the road, the 'marksman' fired more shots into their bodies, causing a grotesque scene I will never forget. [...] For four hours those bodies lay in the road, while the constant stream of traffic carefully made its way around them. [...]"

In light of the increased involvement of supralocal government agents in such violence, neither the identity of the assassins nor the reach of local authorities' power was always apparent. Cassiers and Bessette recount the testimony of a young woman who was told that a man whose description matched her husband's had been shot in the street. Upon running out, she found him to be someone else. As a crowd gathered, the assassins returned to the scene in a Mercedes, took the victim's identity papers and left. By-standing Kebele officials did not act.<sup>81</sup>

In contrast to earlier displays of dead bodies that had accompanied the *netasa ermeja*, the killings of the Red Terror were widely publicised by the Derg. *Nebelbal* elite units, stationed at the palace since late 1976 and under the Derg's direct command, were increasingly involved in carrying out searches and executions.<sup>82</sup> Images of corpses displayed on the streets were broadcast on national television.<sup>83</sup> Whereas accounts of the Ethiopian Terror in the international media remained scarce, undermined by the expulsion of journalists and overshadowed by events in the Ogaden,<sup>84</sup> news outlets

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81. Cassiers and Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*, 476-7.

82. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 209; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 110.

83. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 197.

84. This effect of the international attention on the Ogaden war is reflected in the UK National Archives, where reports on the Terror are eclipsed between July and October 1977.

within the country in print and on air resumed announcing the killing of "counter-revolutionaries" in triumphalist tones.

Public demonstrations were held condemning regime opponents, which relatives of victims were in numerous recorded cases forced to participate in.<sup>85</sup> Such state-enforced disregard for cultural norms surrounding the treatment of dead bodies and practices of mourning were among the harshest social impacts of the Red Terror.<sup>86</sup> Official photographer Shimelis Desta, who fled Ethiopia in 1981 carrying more than 7,000 negatives,<sup>87</sup> was charged to take gruesome pictures of streets in Addis Ababa strewn with dead bodies.<sup>88</sup> Whether these images were used as deterrents, as tools of interrogation or for other purposes remains unclear.

The effects of these officially sanctioned displays and announcements of violence were twofold: on the one hand, the meanings of the Terror's violence became more regime-driven and less localised. The murdered bodies of real or suspected regime opponents became symbols of Derg sovereignty, understood in Mbembe's sense as "the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die",<sup>89</sup> as well as of the cost and dangers of opposition. On the other hand, the open displays, announcements and justifications of collective violence meant that the Terror was normalised and absorbed into everyday life in Addis Ababa. Officially sanctioned violence was, as Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois have observed in another context, "experienced by perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders - and [in some cases] even by victims themselves - as

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85. Amnesty International, Newsletter from Ethiopia, April 1978.

86. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012; cf. Abbink, 'The impact of violence', 138.

87. Paul Gilroy, 'Shemelis Desta: The Emperor' in *Next Level*, Edition 16 (2009), 102-6.

88. Interview, Shimelis Desta, 17 February 2011.

89. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 11.

expected, routine, even justified."<sup>90</sup> The state of exception began to be internalised and institutionalised, thereby developing into a new state of normality.

In December 1977, the Derg intensified its campaign of Red Terror.<sup>91</sup> According to British sources, the decision was made by the Supreme Military Strategic Committee, which at this stage included Russian and Cuban members.<sup>92</sup> In one Kebele alone, 592 suspected EPRP sympathisers were arrested between December and mid-January.<sup>93</sup> The number of detentions and executions escalated; during a single night on 16 December, up to 300 detainees were executed.<sup>94</sup> A group of US congressmen visiting Addis Ababa that December witnessed lines of executed youths lying on the streets, many with placards bearing revolutionary slogans posted on them.<sup>95</sup> British informants report that concomitantly "thousands" of unemployed youths, seen as potential dissenters and EPRP sympathisers, were sent to the countryside to assist in harvesting.<sup>96</sup>

Arrests, detentions and public executions were supplemented by nightly house to house searches and covert executions outside the city, with victims buried in mass graves that were only discovered in the 1990s.<sup>97</sup> Some of these practices tended towards less overt and less public forms of violence, a transition that would soon be actively pursued by the Derg. In December 1977 and January 1978, however, much of the

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90. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace*, 22.

91. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 242-4.

92. FCO 31/2257-5, Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, January 1978.

93. FCO 31/2257-2, Report by Caruthers to the EAD, 20 January 1978.

94. Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Reckoning under the Law* (Human Rights Watch: New York, 1994), 104.

95. Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror*, 159.

96. FCO 31/2257-5, Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, January 1978.

97. Getatchew Mekasha, 'The Ethiopian holocaust - never again!', in *Ethiopian Review* (February 1992), 12-3.

Terror's violence remained firmly in the public square.<sup>98</sup> The Derg announced the official death toll of the Red Terror between December 1977 and March 1978 to lie at 480.<sup>99</sup> But in light of mass graves unearthed in the early 1990s and of the cumulative contemporary evidence, it is evident that this figure is a significant understatement. Norman Singer's estimate that between 4000 and 5000 were killed in Addis Ababa between November 1977 and March 1978 aligns with the conservative end of the Special Prosecutor's figures.<sup>100</sup>

The violence of the Red Terror targeted and transgressed cultural and psychological divisions between public and private spheres. Nightly house searches in particular intruded into the private domain, disrupting and damaging "the relations of protection, safety, trust and love" in society.<sup>101</sup> Much like other historical reigns of terror, the Ethiopia's revolutionary violence was driven by a logic of totality: "terror must be everywhere, or it must be nowhere".<sup>102</sup> The erosion of trust at different levels of society resulting from such totality was to constitute one of the lasting social and psychological legacies of the Ethiopian Terror.

But it would be wrong to represent the urban population merely as participants or as passive victims of the Red Terror. Many found ways of asserting their agency and of extending relations of protection by resisting state claims on their lives and domestic

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98. See Gunnar Hasselblatt aka Hans Eerik, 'Boy of 14 is shot dead after being tortured in Ethiopian Red Terror', in *The Times*, 22 March 1978. The article was published in March but written in January: cf. FCO 58/1417-16, EAD report on Human Rights in Ethiopia, April 1978.

99. FCO 31/2257-19, BBC Report on the Ethiopian Red Terror, 28 March 1978.

100. Norma Singer, 'Ethiopia: Human Rights, 1968 to 1978' in Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1979), 672; cf. Interview, Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

101. Cf. Robben, 'The assault on basic trust', 71, 75.

102. Baker, *The French Revolution*, xiv.

spheres. Thus in neighbourhoods across the capital local residents, and mothers in particular, "went an extra mile to protect their children" by attempting to foil nightly house to house searches.<sup>103</sup> Some of these residents, who often belonged to an older generation, were organised as "family councils" by the EPRP; others acted autonomously. They damaged street lighting, switched off all domestic lights and made loud noises by banging pots and wailing when search teams entered a neighbourhood. Complete darkness, noise and commotion could make the nightly searches ineffectual, depriving the search teams of the necessary element of surprise, enabling targeted youths to escape unnoticed and in some cases even allowing for successful ambushes.<sup>104</sup> *Addis Zemen* complained about this "anti-revolutionary agitation among parents", unsurprisingly to little effect.<sup>105</sup>

Such brave expressions of dissent notwithstanding, the normative context of the Red Terror imposed tight corners that restricted individual agency. Local agents were widely compelled to collaborate and remaining neutral constituted a dangerous act of "walking on the edge", in the words of one informant.<sup>106</sup> The difficulties of staying uninvolved were all the greater for those well known within their communities, as the case of 1968 Olympic marathon champion and 1972 silver medallist Mamo Wolde graphically illustrates. In one of the EPRDF's Red Terror trials that garnered the most international attention, including repeated interventions by the International Olympic Committee, Mamo Wolde was convicted for murder in 2002. The frail champion, who

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103. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 272.

104. *Voice of the Militant Youth, Newsletter of the Ethiopian Students Union in Africa and the Middle East (ESUAME)* (November 1977).

105. *Addis Zemen*, 9 Teqemt 1970 E.C. [19 October 1977].

106. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

died months later, was immediately released for having already served one and a half times his sentence of six years in anticipation of the verdict.<sup>107</sup>

A popular figure, Mamo had been elected to an administrative role within his Kebele. On the evening of 22 March 1978, he had been asked to participate in a house search, in which fifteen year old Samuel Alemu was lethally wounded. Mamo was ordered to shoot the boy, who was accused of being a member of the EPRP.<sup>108</sup> Whether Mamo shot and killed the boy, as a solitary eyewitness alleges, or whether he missed on purpose and the boy was already dead, as claimed by Mamo's defence, has remained a moot point.<sup>109</sup> Mamo Wolde was no revolutionary, and there appears to have been no ulterior motive for his participation in the search and the shooting.<sup>110</sup> Rather, he was forced to experience how marginal the scope for neutrality left by the Red Terror could be. Like many of his contemporaries, Mamo Wolde found himself a participant in acts of collective violence with which he scarcely identified.

A prominent concern of the Derg during the officially sanctioned Red Terror of late 1977 and early 1978 was the recentralisation of control over the state's means of violence. Local agency in directing the Terror needed to be constrained. Clear procedures were put in place to regulate the transfer of information and of "detainees whose interrogation is anticipated to produce significant results" from the Kebele and

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107. See the journalistic account of Mamo's experience in Kenny Moore, 'The Ordeal of Mamo Wolde' (2005), available at [www.kennymoore.us/kcmarticles/woldehonolulu/woldestory.htm](http://www.kennymoore.us/kcmarticles/woldehonolulu/woldestory.htm).

108. *Addis Tribune*, 2 April 1999: 'Ethiopia: Sports Hero Mamo Wolde Accused of Murder'

109. Richard Goldstein, 'Mamo Wolde, Olympic Marathon Champion', *New York Times*, 28 May 2002.

110. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 29 March 2012. Ermias has been researching the case and conducted interviews with Mamo's family.

Keftegna level to the Derg's Central Investigation Department.<sup>111</sup> Meetings were convened by the Head of the Derg's Security, Tesfaye Woldeselassie, with a view to strengthen government control over revolutionary violence and to limit "the number of people with authority to take [violent] actions."<sup>112</sup> Local autonomy in conducting interrogations and carrying out the Terror was thus to be minimised.

This process was neither linear nor uncontested. The authority invested in Kebele officers and the violence-legitimising discourse of revolution continued to be harnessed by local actors for private purposes. Like other civil conflicts, the Red Terror generated a framework that conferred legitimacy on actions which "in peacetime would be punishable as crimes."<sup>113</sup> State control over the urban violence remained limited until early 1978, as Kebele officials tested the limits of their autonomy and maintained the initiative in the implementation of terror on the ground. The officially sanctioned Red Terror was defined by this ongoing tension between centralised control and local agency. Both processes - the Derg's increasing claim of control over the exercise of violence carried out in its name and the limits to the success of such claims - are illustrated in the case of Kelbessa Negew, who to many became the face of the Red Terror in the Gulele district of Addis Ababa. Kelbessa was later to be tried three times for his actions during the Terror, in two countries: once in the United States in what became an extradition case, after he had been sued by former victims from his Kebele. And twice in Ethiopia as part of the Red Terror trials, first in absentia and subsequently,

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111. See instructions from Major Berhanu Kebede to Debela Dinsa, 17 January 1978 in SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 31-2.

112. See notes of meeting at Lt. Colonel Tesfaye Woldeselassie's office, 24 January 1978 in SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 53-4.

113. David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil War* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998), 12.

having won an appeal against his first conviction, after his extradition.<sup>114</sup> As a result, Kelbessa's violent local reign is not only among the most infamous of the Terror, but also among the best documented.

Born in 1950, Kelbessa gained a diploma in public health and took a government job before the revolution broke out. He won a government scholarship to study in the United States, but was denied the opportunity to take it up through the nepotist machinations of a senior official, whose nephew took his place instead.<sup>115</sup> Kelbessa would later credit this experience with fuelling his hatred for those privileged by the imperial system. The revolution, however, offered alternative routes of social advancement. Kelbessa began to work at his newly established Kebele, and was soon elected Chairman of Kefteгна 09, overseeing a number of Kebeles. In this function, he was often seen patrolling the streets of his local administration, armed with an automatic gun and accompanied by his militia.<sup>116</sup> His actions in "weeding out anti-revolutionary elements" were authorised by and reported to the regime, to which he also regularly applied for firearms, ammunition and press coverage.<sup>117</sup> Under Kelbessa and his fellow Kefteгна official Samrat Mamo, possibly the most high-profile female perpetrator of the Terror in Addis Ababa, the neighbourhood of Gulele became a hot spot of revolutionary violence by late 1977. Kelbessa's violence particularly targeted youths within the area associated with the *ancien régime*. Even decades later, he would describe many of his victims, including the women from his neighbourhood who sued

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114. Interview, Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

115. See the exceptionally well-researched article, based on court records and interviews, in *The New York Times*: Andrew Rice, 'The Long Interrogation', 4 June 2006.

116. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

117. Abebe-Jira vs Negew, United States Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit, no.93-9133.

him for torture, as "the feudal children".<sup>118</sup> "They didn't like the change", he argued, and hence stood in the way of the revolution.

The first of the later claimants in US courts to have been arrested was Elizabeth Demissie, who at the time was seventeen. Her father had been a High Court Judge during the imperial era. Elizabeth was taken from her home in October 1977, along with her fifteen year old sister Haymanot. At the Keftegna 09 jail, Elizabeth was tortured using the infamous *Wofe Ilala* method under Kelbessa's personal supervision. Days later, Haymanot was taken from her cell for interrogation. She never returned. Elizabeth remained in detention until June 1978.<sup>119</sup> Weeks later, Hirut Abebe was arrested. Her father had been a lawyer with ties to the imperial court; Hirut herself sympathised with the EPRP. She was twice arrested, in December 1977 and January 1978, and tortured by Kelbessa during hour-long interrogations in which she was stripped and whipped on her legs and back with wire. She was subsequently detained for three months. Those months of detention and torture defined her subsequent life, later motivating her to found the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center.<sup>120</sup> Ejegayehu Taye, whose father had been a senator, was arrested in February 1978. Kelbessa and several Kebele guards ordered her to remove her clothes before hanging her from a pole and severely beating her. Her wounds were given no medical attention, and she was repeatedly tortured during the following ten months of detention. Her treatment resulted in permanent physical scars which she later showed in the US court case.

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118. *The New York Times* (Andrew Rice), 'The Long Interrogation', 4 June 2006.

119. *Abebe-Jira vs Negew*, United States Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit, no.93-9133.

120. Interview, Hirut Abebe, 16 June 2012.

These cases bear out common experiences of young residents during the final phase of the Terror, not only in Kelbessa's Gulele neighbourhood but across Addis Ababa.<sup>121</sup> Kelbessa himself was purged from his position in 1979 and spent several years in prison before fleeing to the United States in 1987. His brutal time in charge of Kebele militias bears out the aggregate mode of violence during the officially sanctioned Red Terror. Revolutionary violence was still carried out and in many instances initiated by local actors, but it was now dependent on greater centralised authorisation and supervision. One expression of such centralised control was the requirement to report all investigations and to transfer requested detainees to branches of the Derg's security apparatus for interrogation.<sup>122</sup> As central sites of interrogations, the capital's many prisons were thus becoming increasingly important centres of the Red Terror.

By January 1978, the intended results of the Derg's Red Terror campaign were beginning to show. The urban opposition was debilitated, undermined by the barrage of searches, arrests and executions aimed at its local membership and organisational structures. The effectiveness of these operations against dissenters was founded on increased local information, in large part extracted from EPRP members and sympathisers through interrogations involving the systematic use of torture.<sup>123</sup> Central to these interrogations was the diverse and diffuse network of prisons and detention facilities spread across the capital.

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121. Interview, Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

122. SPO, *ደግሞ ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 31.

123. FCO 31/2257-2, Report by Caruthers to the EAD, 20 January 1978.

Writing in 1978, Katz observed that "there are jails all over Addis. [...] There are around 320 prisons alone, with capacities between twenty and several thousand. They are all filled."<sup>124</sup> The figure represents an estimate combining Addis Ababa's 291 Kebeles - most of which possessed their own jail<sup>125</sup> - with large detention facilities like Karchelle. The 'Alem Bekagn' ['I have had enough of the world'] wing of that prison complex has been described by de Waal as "the epicentre" of the Red Terror, with "thousands upon thousands [passing] through its gates."<sup>126</sup> Among others, the headquarters of the Derg, the First and Fourth Division of the Armed Forces, the city's six police stations and the Central Investigation Department as well as other branches of the security apparatus all had their own detention facilities.<sup>127</sup> Most of these jails were either improvised responses to the Red Terror's huge demand for greater prison capacity or had been expanded to that end.<sup>128</sup>

Prisons were already operating at full capacity when the Red Terror's renewed spur towards arrests and detentions began.<sup>129</sup> In September 1977, an East German delegation reported that the Special Investigation Department, home to a detention facility that was not among Addis Ababa's largest jails, held about 500 detainees.<sup>130</sup> Following the official proclamation of Red Terror, overcrowding became pervasive. In late October 1977, the officer in charge of the prison within the Arat Kilo Palace compound, which

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124. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 5.

125. Amnesty International, Afr. 25/04/79, June 1979.

126. de Waal, 'A permanent Human Rights memorial', 156.

127. For an almost comprehensive list, see SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 30-1.

128. Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression*, 81.

129. Cf. SPO, **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 41.

130. BStU MfS Arbeitsbereich Neiber 21, 'Bericht zum Aufenthalt einer Delegation des MfS in Addis Abeba' ['Report on the stay of a MfS delegation in Addis Ababa'], 27 September 1977, 64.

had hastily been established adjacent to the Derg's Investigation Department, complained about the number of detainees held at what was designed as a temporary facility: "due to the overcrowding of cells", he wrote, "the prisoners are being kept within the compound, next to where the personnel is posted for guard duties", thus making guarding the grounds extremely difficult.<sup>131</sup> Prisons were literally overflowing. According to Amnesty International, there were as many as 30,000 prisoners in the capital by late 1977.<sup>132</sup>

For most detainees, experience of interrogations began at Kebele or Keftegna level. If they were deemed potentially significant informants they were transferred to bigger prisons such as Makelawi or Karchelle for further questioning or for more permanent incarceration.<sup>133</sup> Advanced interrogations of 'counter-revolutionary' detainees, built on systematically employed torture methods, also occurred in designated safe houses across Addis Ababa. Many of these, such as the former residence of Ras Asserate Kassa or the infamous "Bermuda Triangle" in the residential Old Airport neighbourhood, were houses that had been nationalised in 1975.<sup>134</sup> Located in the hearts of residential neighbourhoods, they emulated Kebele jails in bringing the terrors of torture into the hearts of local communities.

There is little to gain from a detailed account of torture methods here; gruesome catalogues of interrogation techniques employed in socialist Ethiopia are readily

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131. SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 41.

132. Amnesty International, Newsletter from Ethiopia, April 1978, 8; cf. Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Reckoning under the Law*, 104.

133. Almost half of my informants experienced these two stages of detention and interrogation.

134. SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 67-71.

available elsewhere.<sup>135</sup> However, three observations concerning neglected aspects of interrogations and torture during the Red Terror need to be made. Firstly, there was a strong continuity in the methods of torture employed with earlier practices that had been developed by security services during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I.<sup>136</sup> The primary discontinuities lay in scale rather than method.

Secondly, there were gender dynamics involved in interrogations that merit closer attention. The sexual abuse of female detainees by male torturers and guards is often acknowledged to have widely occurred in private conversations, but it is scarcely discussed in the literature. Entirely disregarded is the role of women as torturers in the Red Terror. One informant recalled that at Kebele 27, a girl was among his torturers; his brother, interrogated at another Kebele, was similarly interrogated by a woman.<sup>137</sup> It is unclear whether this was a deliberate strategy employed to break detainees, as practiced in other regimes of torture,<sup>138</sup> or due to decisions that were not gender-specific. Like the wider dynamics of sexual violence during the Ethiopian Terror, the role of female torturers remains a difficult topic awaiting closer examination.

Finally, it is important to highlight the extent to which interrogations were targeted at the unveiling and dismantling of clandestine organisational structures. It is true that countless innocent persons were tortured in the Terror and that neither the forms nor the extent of inflicted suffering can be fully accounted for with reference to operational

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135. For an extensive list of torture methods used in the Red Terror, only few of which are either rare or fanciful, see Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 150 f.; SPO, **ጸግ የዘለ ዶሴ**, 69-70.

136. Norman Singer, 'Ethiopia: Human Rights, 1968 to 1978' in Robert Hess (ed.), *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1979), 670 f.

137. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

138. In Kenya, for instance, the specific employment of women as interrogators during the Emergency in the 1950s has recently been highlighted by the files of the Hanslope Disclosure. Cf. Anderson, 'British abuse and torture', 704.

targets alone. Nonetheless, such targets played a pervasive role: interrogations were widely focused on questions of recruitment - "By whom? With whom? Whom?"<sup>139</sup> - in order to map opposition networks. Information thus obtained was efficiently reported to and systematised by investigation departments to eradicate the urban opposition's infrastructure at the grassroots level.<sup>140</sup> A detailed overview of these reports will only be possible once the SPO archives are fully released.

The mass detentions and extensive interrogations of the Red Terror not only debilitated the civilian opposition to the Derg; they also implied a significant expansion of the Derg's security apparatus. Command structures and practices of detention and interrogation were institutionally entrenched and normalised. As a result, the violence of the Red Terror was profoundly bureaucratised and ingrained into the structure of the Ethiopian state, as well as into state-society relations. This bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of collective violence would represent one of the Terror's enduring legacies.

### **Terror overt and covert**

In the opening months of 1978, the Red Terror began to be taken off the streets of Addis Ababa and to recede to detention facilities, out of the public eye.<sup>141</sup> Open displays of violence gradually abated; detentions, disappearances and the nightly gunfire of

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139. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 85.

140. SPO, *ጊዮ ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 67-71; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 323-4, 334-5.

141. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 57.

executions persisted as the primary indicators of the ongoing Terror.<sup>142</sup> This shift in the mode of violence afforded the Derg greater control over the urban Terror. It eased international diplomatic pressure that the displays of deadly force had provoked. But it also meant that when open killings had largely ceased by April 1978, the Terror was not ended but altered. While Ethiopia's revolutionary violence no longer defined the impressions of visitors by the end of the year,<sup>143</sup> prisons remained overcrowded and extra-judicial executions persisted unseen. State violence assumed a form of public secrecy, known but covert. With its violent practices engrained into the working of state institutions and its memory and threat internalised by the urban population, the Terror continued to be experienced long after the civilian opposition was declared defeated.

Several reasons for the shift towards a more covert mode of violence can be surmised. Foremost were the Derg's continued anxieties about local autonomy in the implementation of the Terror. Open violence was difficult to control. Thus on 24 January 1978, the leading figures of the Derg's security apparatus convened at Tesfaye Wolde Selassie's office to discuss how to reduce the number of people with authority to carry out "[revolutionary] measures".<sup>144</sup> They decided that searches should henceforth only be carried out with explicit centralised authorisation, and that communication links needed to be tightened further. During the meeting it was emphasised that "corpses [should no longer] be found everywhere". Demanded changes were soon observable on the ground.<sup>145</sup> In April, recalcitrant Kebele leaders were purged after a committee was

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142. FCO 31/2257-21, Witness account by Mrs. Gladys Buck, 10 April 1978.

143. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

144. SPO, ደግሞ ያዘለ ዶሴ, 53-5.

145. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 242-4.

established to investigate abuses of authority during the Red Terror.<sup>146</sup> British sources suggest that these purges may have been encouraged by East German and Soviet advisors, who were "appalled by the [ongoing] Red Terror".<sup>147</sup>

The form and extent of the Terror was making Ethiopia "something of an embarrassment to the rest of Africa".<sup>148</sup> The Derg was unable to isolate Addis Ababa's large diplomatic community from the ubiquitous collective violence. In January 1978, for instance, a dead body had been dropped at the entrance to the Organisation of African Unity, causing outrage among diplomats.<sup>149</sup> International diplomatic pressure on the Derg mounted, as Amnesty International publicised the excesses of the Ethiopian Terror and the United Nations Human Rights Council convened a meeting to discuss the country's human rights situation.<sup>150</sup> In the context of newly established Soviet patronage these may not have been primary concerns for the Derg. But they lend credence to suggestions of socialist bloc pressure to discontinue the urban displays of collective violence.

Perhaps most significant in the shift towards a more covert mode of violence was the fact that the Red Terror was already achieving its objectives by early 1978. At the end of March, the Derg declared that the EPRP had been "wiped out" in Addis Ababa.<sup>151</sup> Certainly by April, the urban opposition was "virtually eliminated as [an]

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146. FCO 31/2257-36, Embassy report from Addis Ababa, 27 April 1978.

147. See FCO 31/2257-36, Embassy report from Addis Ababa, 27 April 1978. BStU archives contain no evidence of such pressure to end the Terror.

148. FCO 31/2079-7, EEC Ambassadors' Memorandum, 10 March 1977.

149. SPO, **ደግሞ ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 53.

150. FCO 58/1417, Memo on UNHRC meeting, 26 April 1978.

151. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 170.

effective anti-government force".<sup>152</sup> Addis Ababa was under uncontested government control.<sup>153</sup> Many opposition activists who had eluded capture and remained determined to resist the Derg fled to the countryside to join rural insurgencies, which received a significant boost as a result.<sup>154</sup> Others were quietly arrested in the following months, as the net of confessions and denunciations closed in on remaining dissenters. The Derg no longer required the open displays of violence that had defined the officially sanctioned Red Terror in order to assert its power and to eliminate opposition. Confining systematic violence to the capital's network of detention centres afforded the regime more centralised control. It also allowed an apparent state of normality to return to Addis Ababa. Inscribed into this new normality, however, were the workings and experiences of the state of exception. The memory, the threat and the 'public secrecy' of ongoing covert violence continued to define urban life, and sufficed to stifle urban dissent.

### **The end of the Terror?**

Addressing the 1978 May Day demonstration in Revolution Square, Mengistu Haile Mariam remarked on the contrast to earlier years, when these events had been showcases of support for the EPRP and Meison. By 1978, the Red Terror had

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152. FCO 31/2257-36, Embassy report from Addis Ababa, 27 April 1978.

153. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 57.

154. Interview, Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012; cf. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 31; Assafa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for Renewal*, 39.

eliminated these alleged "false revolutionaries".<sup>155</sup> In a demonstration of the coercive capacity of the Kebele structure, itself largely the result of needing to respond to the challenges of the Terror, tens of thousands were mobilised to demonstrate in the driving rain. Beginning with this 1978 edition, the capital's May Day demonstrations became dreary affairs;<sup>156</sup> the revolutionary fervour of the previous years had been quenched by the Red Terror.

With Addis Ababa under effective government control, the Terror migrated to new venues and converged on new targets. Having declared itself victorious over urban opponents in the capital, the Derg announced that the Red Terror would henceforth be transferred to other towns.<sup>157</sup> There, the same methods as in the capital were employed to dismantle clandestine organisational structures, which had been boosted by activists fleeing Addis Ababa. In Dase, for example, 150 alleged 'counter-revolutionaries' were arrested in a single search campaign, with 22 executed on the spot. The majority of those arrested had come to Dase from Addis Ababa. Seeking to escape the urban Terror, they experienced its repression twice.<sup>158</sup> The Terror was especially fierce in Gonder, where it was coordinated by the infamous Major Melaku Teferra. A local history of Gonder's revolutionary violence is currently being written by Solomon Getahun;<sup>159</sup> what is already evident is that state violence here intensified when the Terror eased in Addis Ababa in early 1978, and continued well into 1979.<sup>160</sup>

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155. FCO 21-2257-34, Embassy report from Addis Ababa, 3 May 1978.

156. FCO 31/2510-18, Embassy report from Addis Ababa, 15 May 1979.

157. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 170.

158. Abdu Muhammad, 'A history of Dase Town', 88.

159. Preliminary findings were presented at the African Union Human Rights Memorial Consultative Meeting, held in Addis Ababa in September 2013.

160. SPO, ክፍል ሁለት: የፌዴራል ክፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ, 20th Defendant's Evidence; FCO 31/2257-25, EAD to British Embassy, 7 February 1979.

In addition to triggering a geographic expansion, the waning of the Red Terror in the capital also resulted in a new demographic focus for the Derg's repression. As the urban opposition faltered, state violence turned towards new victims. Particularly targeted were Oromos suspected of fomenting ethno-nationalist sentiments and Protestant Christians, in the South of the country as well as in Addis Ababa.<sup>161</sup> These repressions widely intersected, as the execution of Oromo Church leader Gudina Tumsa demonstrates.<sup>162</sup> While such later forms of state violence lie beyond the scope of this study, it is important to emphasise that they are closely tied to the preceding Red Terror, methodically and chronologically: these repressions were carried out by the same institutional structures, from the expanded and centralised security apparatus to the armed Kebele administrations, as the urban Terror.<sup>163</sup> They drew on the same means of control, most notably the dismantling of organisational and leadership structures through interrogations, detentions and covert executions. Chronologically, too, the continuity with the urban Terror was apparent: with the politically organised opposition defeated, the Derg turned its attention to other groups.

Of particular concern to the regime was the growth of Evangelical Churches, often Pentecostal, which expanded in size and number by converts disillusioned with the revolutionary promise. Across urban Ethiopia, the Terror caused a retreat from political activism and Marxist ideology.<sup>164</sup> Antipathy towards 'new religions' imbued into many officials by their Orthodox upbringings combined with revolutionary condemnations of

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161. See Amnesty International's open letter to the international community in Geneva, cited in FCO 31/2528-63, September 1979.

162. See Oyvind Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: the Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1975-1985* (James Currey: Oxford, 2000), 175-9; Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa*, 248-50.

163. Cf. Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression*, 86-7.

164. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 285.

'imperialist imports' to fuel the persecution of these expanding Churches.<sup>165</sup> Providing a discourse and allegiance independent of the state, growing Evangelicalism was regarded as a remaining obstacle to developing totalitarian rule.

Such totalitarianism found new forms following the apparent conclusion of the urban Terror in 1978, despite the fact that large parts of the country, particularly in the militarised frontiers of Eritrea, Tigray and Gonder, still eluded effective state control. If Mengistu Haile Mariam's radical faction had represented but one wing of the Derg at the onset of the Terror in 1976, his power was unquestioned, rivalling the personalised centralism of the late Emperor, within a mere two years.<sup>166</sup> The new political order was graphically enacted during a second state visit of Fidel Castro in September 1978, when Mengistu posed enthroned with his illustrious visitor in Revolution Square.<sup>167</sup> Underpinning the Derg's increasingly totalitarian rule were the institutionalised vestiges of the Red Terror. Ethiopia had, in the words of an Amnesty International Report, "turned into one big jail".<sup>168</sup> Nightly house searches, large-scale detentions, interrogations involving the systematic use of torture and extrajudicial executions continued to define urban Ethiopia under the Derg. Prominent detainees like Haile Fida, who refused offers to return their services to the regime,<sup>169</sup> "disappeared" from prison in 1979.<sup>170</sup> Many others remained incarcerated until the mid-1980s. But the reverberations of the Terror were not restricted to detention centres, nor even to practices of violence

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165. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012; see John Markakis. *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (James Currey: Oxford, 2011), 187; Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 145.

166. Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, Part II.

167. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 459.

168. Amnesty International, Afr. 25/04/79, June 1979.

169. BStU HVA 87, Information on questions concerning developments in Ethiopia, 24 October 1977, 58.

170. Amnesty International, AI 24/05/80, 22 April 1980.

that had become bureaucratised and normalised in the state's institutions. Schwab's suggestion that in the aftermath of the Terror, urban Ethiopia's "everyday life is peaceful and nonviolent" is at once shallow and distasteful.<sup>171</sup> It ignores the extent to which experiences of the Terror's violence were internalised by the population. A continuum of violence does not depend on its sustained open expression.

No reliable figures for mental health conditions exist in Ethiopia, but all of my informants could identify cases of mental illness developed during or very soon after the Terror, seemingly triggered by the period's traumatic experiences. Kahssay Tekeste noted that such cases are particularly common in the *Mehaber* ['mutual help association'] of mothers of Red Terror victims that he administers.<sup>172</sup> Social trust was similarly eroded by the experiences of denunciation, deprivation and depersonalisation that had defined the Terror. Behind the appearance of a reestablished urban peace lay the realities of profoundly damaged social and psychological welfare. The continuum of violence had not been broken by the dying down of machine gun fire.

The gradual retreat of open violence from the streets of Addis Ababa in the months following April 1978, then, marked only a relative end to Ethiopia's urban Terror. Bureaucratised and inscribed into a state apparatus that had been expanded in both size and capacity, and internalised into the social and psychological make-up of the urban population, the revolutionary violence of the Terror did not simply cease. Its exercise and experience lastingly shaped Ethiopia's state, society and the relations between them.

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171. Peter Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society* (Frances Pinter: London, 1985), 67.

172. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012; see also the discussion of psychological violence in Abbink, 'Transformations of violence', 57.

## Chapter 5 - **Struggle and Sacrifice**

### The experience of collective violence

The violence of Ethiopia's revolutionary terror campaigns was pervasive. It was played out in every domain of urban life, dominating and transforming Addis Ababa's social relations. From private homes to the public square, collective violence became an integral part of lived experience for the capital's residents in revolutionary Ethiopia. The previous three chapters have chronologically surveyed the Terror's unfolding and analysed its dynamics of violence. This chapter adopts a thematic approach instead, examining how revolutionary violence impacted different spheres of urban life and how it was experienced by actors on the ground.

Most of the Terror's violence was set in four different arenas: firstly the streets, broadly conceptualised to encompass the public areas of Addis Ababa, in which rival narratives of power, popularity and control were enacted. Secondly the domestic realm, drawn into the Terror as a base for clandestine activities and as the prime target of search campaigns, hence rarely constituting an apolitical or neutral sphere. Thirdly the Kebele and Kefteгна offices, semi-autonomous outposts of the government at the local level that bridged the divide between the public and the private. By 1977, they were widely operating temporary detention facilities. And finally the established prisons themselves, which in the course of the Terror became defining venues of urban life to an extent unprecedented in Ethiopian history.

In each arena, different experiences and modes of violence prevailed; each defined the Terror in distinct and yet interdependent ways. Drawing on oral interviews conducted with a broad range of contemporary witnesses, triangulated with Ethiopian and international archival sources as well as with published memoirs and analyses of the period, this chapter inquires into the lived experiences of Addis Ababa's revolutionary violence. It thereby examines how different urban arenas were affected and altered by the Terror, and charts the trajectories of the period's social and political legacies.

In light of the partly distinct and often dissonant ways in which Addis Ababa's sizeable expatriate community experienced the Terror, a final section separately examines how non-Ethiopian residents lived through and were impacted by the urban violence. Documentation for these experiences is exceptionally dense, consisting primarily of diplomatic archives but also supplemented by Ethiopian sources and by accounts of experiences in revolutionary Addis Ababa published by expatriates.

Lived experience of the Terror varied widely. It changed over time, differed between urban arenas and depended on local contingencies as well as on residents' political and social positioning. This breadth of experiences begins to account for the diversity of narratives concerning the period that continue to be advanced and argued, providing the empirical foundations on which the latter are constructed. Remarkably, a polyphone history of the Terror, which reflects such variety of experiences, voices and perspectives, remains absent from the politicised and often partisan literature on the period. This chapter builds on the preceding chronological examination of the Terror to challenge this omission. The subsequent chapter will then turn to analyse the highly

contentious narratives and collective memories that have been constructed on this foundation.

### **Street violence**

Much of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence was publicly enacted on the streets of Addis Ababa. Some of the salient features of these public performances of violence have already been highlighted in the preceding chapters. Throughout the early revolutionary period, from 1974 to 1978, the capital's streets constituted primary arenas of contestation. It was on the public stage of the streets that the theatrics of power and protest were performed.

In the build-up to the Terror, contests to claim the public realm and to impress patterns of popularity, control and defiance onto the streets defined urban revolutionary Ethiopia. The Derg staged "mammoth" pro-regime rallies in the purpose-built Revolution Square.<sup>1</sup> May Day demonstrations showcased popular support for the Derg, or more commonly for civilian political organisations and their demands.<sup>2</sup> And intrepid operations, such as the hoisting of regime-defying banners at a public square in broad daylight, were staged to broadcast and advertise the presence and resolve of the clandestine opposition.<sup>3</sup>

The politics of the Terror were intensely public. Organisations like the EPRP may have been rooted in secret study circles and have operated underground, but much of

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1. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27; Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 195-7.

2. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 35, 43; Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 119.

3. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 28.

their appeal consisted in the very public nature of their challenges to the military regime.<sup>4</sup> From the outset, the urban opposition was vigorously noisy. As a result these organisations grew rapidly, their ranks filled by youth activists who were attracted as much by the thrill and adventurism of clandestine operations in the public square as by political convictions and attendant desires to participate in "the making of history".<sup>5</sup> For a generation of youth activists, the targeted penetration of the public realm through the distribution of pamphlets or through the writing of graffiti comprised an integral and exhilarating part of early revolutionary experience.<sup>6</sup>

When the Terror introduced a more violent genre of revolutionary performance, this too was largely produced in the public spheres of the capital. The EPRP's assassination campaign owed much of its efficiency in spreading panic among POMOA and Derg cadres to the public nature of its snipers' and Urban Defense Squads' lethal violence.<sup>7</sup> The audacity of these assassinations made the streets of Addis Ababa a dangerous realm, claimed and feared by regime collaborators and opponents alike. Like the EPRP's assassinations, state violence was enacted in public: search campaigns asserted the Derg's control over the public sphere, enforcing recognition of state power through curfews and roadblocks.<sup>8</sup> Public executions graphically displayed the Derg's ultimate sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> And once the Terror advanced, the murdered bodies of alleged "counter-

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4. Taddede Seyoum Teshale, *The Life History of an Ethiopian Refugee (1994-1991): Sojourn in the Fourth World* (Edward Mellen Press: Lewiston, 1991), 35.

5. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

6. See for example Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

7. This public nature was a mark of the EPRP's "offensive defense" from its onset in September 1976. See e.g. *Ethiopian Herald*, 2 October 1976, 'Fikre Merid Killed Here by Anarchists'.

8. Cf. *Ethiopian Herald*, 24 March 1977, 'Gov't Launches Search Campaign in Addis Ababa'; *Ethiopian Herald*, 8 May 1977, 'To Root Out Internal Reactionary Elements: Second Round Search Campaign Begins Here'; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 201-4.

9. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 196.

revolutionaries" were displayed on the streets,<sup>10</sup> broadcasting - among other messages - the regime's control over the public sphere and the cost of contestation. Through public exhibitions of violence, the Terror's competing narratives of power, popularity and control were thus inscribed onto the streets.

The streets of Addis Ababa also acted as spheres of collective coercion. Residents were forced to openly support the regime's violence, even to participate in it.<sup>11</sup> One informant recalled an incident when murdered youths were displayed on the streets in his neighbourhood. Kebele officials forced residents, including the parents of the victims, to leave their homes, to congregate around the victims and to participate in the shouting of slogans such as "death to anarchists".<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International similarly reported numerous cases in which local residents and relatives of victims were intimidated into participating in public demonstrations condemning regime opponents.<sup>13</sup> The Kebele structure, which provided the state with unprecedented local knowledge and control, played a central role in mobilising such public shows of support for the Derg,<sup>14</sup> becoming an integral ingredient of urban experiences during the years of Terror.

The capital's streets were hence arenas of violent contestation and of coercion. But for many underground activists, they were also experienced as potential safe havens, places in which to hide in broad daylight. Some disguised themselves as priests or monks from the countryside and stayed around churches; others discerned a measure of

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10. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

11. FCO 31/2257-15, Embassy Report on revolution and terror in Addis Ababa, 13 March 1978.

12. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

13. Amnesty International, Newsletter from Ethiopia, April 1978.

14. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 51-5.

safety in overcrowded hospital waiting rooms.<sup>15</sup> Cinemas were a favourite hiding place, providing relative safety, comfort and a space for confidential communication at once.<sup>16</sup> And posing as beggars or drunkards allowed for a public persona that eluded dangerous associations of political activism.<sup>17</sup> These strategies of survival point to an important aspect of public life neglected in our discussion thus far: they were effective only because, even if altered and overshadowed by the Terror, Addis Ababa's urban everyday activities continued as before. Residents continued to go to church, to visit hospitals and to attend cinemas. And beggars and drunkards remained constant features of the urban landscape, despite official condemnation of such activities as being inimical to the revolution.<sup>18</sup>

Yet political struggles constantly permeated the public sphere. This in itself was nothing new: in modern Ethiopia, urban streets had always constituted canvases onto which to project political power. Hilltop palaces and residences of court and nobility had already inscribed representations of power into the capital's geography under its founding Emperor Minilik II.<sup>19</sup> During Haile Selassie I's reign, carefully choreographed military parades in public squares and fields of Addis Ababa became regular occurrences.<sup>20</sup> With the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity's headquarters, the streets of the new diplomatic capital were regularly cleansed of

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15. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

16. Interview, Mekonnen Getu, 13 April 2010.

17. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 10.

18. See for instance *Ethiopian Herald*, 15 August 1976, which advised against the consumption of alcohol, claimed to be "not so becoming of revolutionary times".

19. Peter Garretson, *A History of Addis Ababa from its Foundation in 1886 to 1910* (Otto Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden, 2000), 2.

20. Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie's War* (Signal Books: Oxford, 2003), 47; Theodore Vestal, *The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the shaping of Americans' attitudes towards Africa* (ABC-Clio: Santa Barbara, 2011), 25.

beggars supposedly tarnishing its image.<sup>21</sup> And the Emperor himself frequently paraded his power by being driven along the same streets in his Rolls Royce as part of a lengthy motorcade.<sup>22</sup> Following the revolution, new dynamics and dimensions were added to these public performances of power, largely defined by new forms and extents of violence. With the arguable exception of the Black Shirt massacres of 1937,<sup>23</sup> the fury of state violence unleashed on the urban population in the Terror was unprecedented in the history of modern Ethiopia. Foreshadowed in the student movement but equally unprecedented was the sustained public contestation of authority by demonstrators, activists and urban guerrilla squads.

Their challenge was not directed merely at the military regime, but more fundamentally at the old dichotomy between legitimate state violence and illegitimate non-state violence that the revolution had called into question. The downfall of the *ancien régime* had exposed the state's mythologised and hitherto misrecognised violence, leaving the Derg without the widely accepted distinction between types of violence on which any social order depends.<sup>24</sup> The early revolutionary state was unable to constrain dissent without having its own essential violence unmasked. The urban opposition not only aspired to state power, it already claimed the state's violence-legitimising language: thus the EPRP "liberated" funds from a state-owned bank,<sup>25</sup> it

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21. Paulos Milkias, *Haile Selassie*, ch.6.

22. Charles Schaefer, "'We say they are neftenya, they say we are OLF": a post-election assessment of ethnicity, politics and age-sets in Oromiya' in Tronvoll, Kjetil and Tobias Haggmann, *Contested Power in Ethiopia: Traditional Authorities and Multi-Party Elections* (Brill: Leiden, 2012), 210.

23. Ian Campbell, *The Plot to kill Graziani*, passim.

24. On the necessity of such a distinction, see the discussion in Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 10-21; cf. Lucas, 'Revolutionary violence', 59.

25. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 17.

"confiscated" guns from the police force<sup>26</sup> and it "passed judgment on the people's opponents."<sup>27</sup> Violence on Ethiopia's urban streets thus represented a public contest over revolutionary legitimacy, the direct result of the erosion of the old social order.

Yet the Terror's public violence is not to be understood solely as the result of a breakdown in social order, with its established distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence. It equally represented the founding violence of a new social order, by force imposing a new distinction between state violence, supposedly social order upholding, and violence not sanctioned by the state, declared threatening to social order. Terror in the public realm constituted the founding violence of socialist Ethiopia's social order. As Bailie aptly observes, collective violence is at once the result of social systems falling apart and the basis on which they revive themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The public violence on the streets of Addis Ababa thus represented a constant feature of the Terror, integral to urban residents' experiences of the period. It was in this public arena that state power and social order were violently renegotiated and reconstructed during the Terror. As violence filled the streets, other forms of public life receded. The Terror had an immediate effect on the capital's artistic community, bringing an end to a cultural golden age: the arts had flourished in Addis Ababa during the late imperial era and into the dawn of the revolutionary period. The modernist synergies of cosmopolitan and traditional Ethiopian sources germinated in sophisticated cultural productions. Addis Ababa's Jazz music from that era has since received global acclaim and inspired a new generation of musicians. Fresh forms of abstract and

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26. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 316.

27. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 140.

28. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 6.

expressionist art were developed, perhaps most vividly represented in the works of Gebre Kristos Desta. Other artists, such as Zerihun Yetemgeta, Worku Goshu, Tibebe Terffa and Teshome Bekele produced new forms of modern art drawing on a wide range of traditional African symbolism.<sup>29</sup> Addis Ababa had become a hub of creativity and cultural exchange.

The public enactment of the urban Terror put an end to such fecundity. A strict 10 p.m. curfew curbed the capital's nightlife, spelling the end for numerous music bands and western-style nightclubs.<sup>30</sup> The excitement of new cultural and social departures gave way to the sombreness and despondency of the Terror, ending an inspired moment in the making and patronage of the arts. Cultural production was made subservient to government interests, either through direct control or by self-imposed censorship. The Derg not only imposed a strict censorship on the contents of all artistic production, but also prescribed what art forms were deemed acceptable.<sup>31</sup> 'Socialist Realism' became the new watchword. Known artists were commissioned to produce works that extolled and advanced the regime's revolutionary project. As Geta Mekonnen recalls,

"the artist was always on standby, in complete subservience to the system in order to avoid the fateful consequences of being labeled a bourgeois or degenerate artist."<sup>32</sup>

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29. Geta Mekonnen, 'Beauty and the beast: art and dictatorship in socialist Ethiopia, 1974-1991' in Rebecca Martin Nagy (ed.), *Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists* (Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art: Gainesville, 2007), 32.

30. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten', ch.2.

31. Geta Mekonnen, 'Beauty and the beast', 32.

32. Geta Mekonnen, 'Beauty and the beast', 34.

The novels produced and set during this period by some of Ethiopia's most noted writers - such as *Maebel* ['The Flood'] by Berhanu Zerihun,<sup>33</sup> for example, or *YeQey Kokeb Teri* ['Call of the Red Star'] by Bealu Girma<sup>34</sup> - evidence the same subserviency. Although the authors sought "to capture the spirit of the post-revolutionary period within the limits set for them by the system," a thoughtful review concluded, these works remained essentially "propaganda pieces which tried to glamorize and justify the actions of the government to consolidate its power."<sup>35</sup>

The public violence of the Terror thus displaced other forms of public cultural production. Partly due to the new unsupportive climate, partly "as a form of passive resistance",<sup>36</sup> many artists preferred to curtail their artistic production to seeing it reduced to propaganda purposes. Addis Ababa's golden age of artistic production desiccated in the heat of the Terror.

As the Terror filled the public sphere, alternative forms of street violence were either subsumed or displaced. Addis Ababa's regular crime proved a surprising casualty of the Terror's street violence. With illicit activities subject to unprecedented risks, official crime rates in Addis Ababa plummeted. Dereje Workayehu concludes his careful survey of the capital's criminal life by noting that "at the high time of the Terror in 1977 and 1978 the rate of crime indicated a sharp decline."<sup>37</sup> Reduced levels of criminal activity continued until the early 1980s. The immediate cause may have been the same strict curfew that curtailed the capital's nightlife; with arbitrary and menacing

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33. Berhanu Zerihun, **ማበል** ['The Flood'] (Central Printing Press: Addis Ababa, 1973 E.C. [1980]).

34. Bealu Girma, **የቀይ ኮከብ ጥሪ** ['Call of the Red Star'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 1971 E.C. [1979]).

35. Sileshi Tujji, 'Red-Terror inspired prose fiction: character and thematic issues', MA Thesis in Literature, Addis Ababa University (2007), 15.

36. Geta Mekonnen, *Beauty and the Beast*, 34.

37. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 79.

detention awaiting anyone roaming the streets after 10 p.m., and in light of the real threat of execution if suspected of subversive activities, the incidence of burglaries, muggings and other forms of petty street violence decreased significantly. Following the EPRP's sustained campaign to sabotage state property and production,<sup>38</sup> all crime became prone to being interpreted as politically and economically subversive. Since crime - especially property offences - in Addis Ababa often tended to be a part-time, non-professional occupation to supplement insufficient income,<sup>39</sup> the peril of being classed as 'counter-revolutionary' acted as a powerful deterrent.

Yet the disincentives to petty crime presented by the Terror's street violence do not tell the whole story. The capital's crime was as much reconceptualised and transformed as it was displaced. It was reconceptualised in that the Terror altered the Derg's categorisation of criminal activity. While crime was generally classified as political, social or economic under the Derg - with political crimes being handled by the security police rather than the regular police force - "during the time of the Terror the definition of political crimes broadened."<sup>40</sup> Any crime became potentially political, seen as an affront to revolutionary order or production. Crimes against the economy or the state in particular were commonly labeled 'counter-revolutionary', and subject to correspondingly severe retribution. Political crimes were not recorded in official crime rate figures. Equally unrecorded were the criminal activities of officials that the Terror's street violence facilitated.<sup>41</sup> Members of the security forces in particular were afforded greater freedoms to appropriate the law for their private benefit. Police officers

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38. Hamilton, *Ethiopia's Embattled Revolutionaries*, 14.

39. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten', ch.2.

40. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 77.

41. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 54-5.

regularly took advantage of their positions of power to extort bribes. *Polis enna Ermeja* records the case of two police officers, later convicted for their crimes, who made a generous living by arresting citizens for "anti-revolutionary activities" in order to extort ransom payments from their families.<sup>42</sup>

The Terror also transformed the mode of 'conventional' criminal street violence. Local gangs in particular altered the discourse and arguably the rationale of their violence, while their structures and activities remained much the same. Our knowledge of gang culture, activities and political involvement in early revolutionary Ethiopia remains deficient. However, the archival record of the bi-monthly police magazine *Polis enna Ermeja* ['Police and Enforcement']<sup>43</sup> converges with oral interviews conducted by the anthropologist Marco di Nunzio and with my own interviews to cast some light on at least one such gang, the infamous 'China Group'. The group first appears in the archival record of *Polis enna Ermeja* following street fights in which it killed opponents using shotguns. Active in the Mercato area, the 'China Group' was "a mafia in the making."<sup>44</sup> Its activities focused on extorting money from the area's merchants, although the gang also gained notoriety for "indecorous activities, especially against women."<sup>45</sup> Targeted merchants, it appears, sought safety in numbers, forming the rival 'Genghis Group' in order to defend themselves. As the political contest between rival civilian organisations came to dominate urban life in the build-up to the

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42. *Polis enna Ermeja*, year 16, no. 18 (Hamle 30, 1968 E.C.) [6 August 1976]. Cf. Mulubirhan Adane, 'A history of Tigray under the Derg regime (1974-1989), MA Dissertation in History, Addis Ababa University (2007), 98. Mulubirhan recounts similar cases in Tigray, where wealthy families were "systematically asked to give bribes to gain the release" of detained family members.

43. The magazine was eventually renamed አብዮታዊ ፖሊስ ['Revolutionary Police']. The Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University holds most of its editions.

44. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten', ch.2.

45. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

Terror, the 'China Group' was co-opted into the political conflict, joining the EPRP. According to the historian Shiferaw Bekele, "they became wonderful revolutionaries."<sup>46</sup> Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik adds that the 'China Group' and other gangs such as the 'Kimbibit Group' and the 'Urael Group' were "taken over, re-oriented, disciplined and organised for the revolution" by the EPRP.<sup>47</sup>

Such analyses are too facile. The absorption of Mercato's gang conflict into the Terror's master cleavage - Marco di Nunzio suggests that the 'Genghis Group' was co-opted into Meison<sup>48</sup> - cannot be reduced to a generic instance of the confrontation between the rival civilian political organisations. New political affiliations did not replace local agendas and conflicts. Rather, the invocation of the narrative and symbols of the leftist political organisations redefined Mercato's feuds and identities, fusing the local conflict into the Terror's master cleavage in ways that altered both local and supra-local dynamics.<sup>49</sup> The co-option of Addis Ababa's criminal life into the Terror thus furthered the latter's decentralisation.

### **Violence in the home**

The domestic sphere was both an important arena and a common target of the Terror. Urban homes had first become loci of revolutionary politics on a large scale when High

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46. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

47. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012; cf. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

48. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten', ch.2.

49. Cf. Kalyvas, 'Ontology', 487.

School and University students joined the radical Student Movement *en masse*. As the politics of the Youth Associations came to define the social lives of a generation, private homes inevitably became politicised settings. Across the city, study groups congregated in the relative safety of parental homes, or of houses rented by activists, in order to discuss Marxist literature.<sup>50</sup> Homes were also settings for mobilisation efforts, as siblings and other fellow residents were recruited into revolutionary causes.<sup>51</sup> Where young activists lived with their parents, the politicisation of the domestic sphere frequently resulted in inter-generational tensions. Parents and older relatives were challenged with missionary zeal by young revolutionaries,<sup>52</sup> who in return were often cautioned against the dangers of political confrontation.<sup>53</sup>

Different pressures faced activists who shared rented accommodation, usually both for lodging and as bases of political agitation. Due to the housing shortage caused by the Derg's nationalisation of 'excess' properties in August 1975,<sup>54</sup> revolutionaries often had to accommodate to crowded and rudimental conditions. Konjit Teklu, who had grown up in the relative comforts of a middle class home, tells of having to share a single room with a married couple and a security guard when she went into hiding in late 1976.<sup>55</sup> The room also doubled as a nodal point for EPRP leaflets and arms. From

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50. See e.g. Hiwot Terefe, *Tower in the Sky*, 35-70; Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

51. Examples of families in which all siblings joined the same, or even opposing, political organisations abound. Ermias Wolde Amlak provided numerous examples from his neighbourhood: Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

52. Original Wolde Giorgis recalls assuring her mother that she would "get [her] salvation with the masses", little comfort to a mother concerned about her daughter's safety; Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

53. See for example Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

54. Clapham, *Continuity and Transformation*, 51.

55. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 13.

the beginning of the revolutionary period, then, private homes were both places of refuge and centres of activism.

With the onset of the Terror, urban homes became regular targets of raids and searches. Always thin and permeable, the lines dividing the private realm from the public thus became increasingly blurred. One informant recalls the experience of an illiterate neighbour in the Tekle Haymanot area, who had found *Democrasia* pamphlets on the street and taken them home to be used as toilet paper.<sup>56</sup> During a search these pamphlets were found, and the hapless neighbour was arrested on suspicion of illegally duplicating subversive literature. The most mundane aspects of domestic urban life had become inexorably politicised. Raids on private homes often came in clusters and typically at night, violating the privacy and security of the home while asserting the unrestricted claim and reach of the state. One young resident of Addis Ababa recalls a Kebele search squad raiding her house five times in a single night, on each call arresting one of the household's teenagers - her brothers and cousins.<sup>57</sup> Any sense of domestic safety was shattered as a result. The logic of the Terror allowed for no private realm untouched by revolutionary violence.

The dynamics of revolutionary violence in urban homes reveal the inadequacy of occasionally voiced conceptualisations of the Terror. Some analysts of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence have sought to map a class structure onto the political cleavage between competing political organisations.<sup>58</sup> Others have attempted an ethnic analysis

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56. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012. An analogous story of a fellow inmate is told by Original Wolde Giorgis, interviewed on 22 March 2012.

57. Membere Tsion, cited in Cassiers and Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*, 481-5.

58. See for example Chege, 'The Revolution Betrayed', 371; Lefort, *Heretical Revolution*, 200; cf. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 55.

of the Terror, linking particular political organisations and ethnic groups together.<sup>59</sup> The strongest refutation of these projects, which are often born of a desire to conform reality to the mould of theory, lies in the fact that the line separating conflicting parties often ran not between classes, ethnic groups or even localities, but rather through the midst of families and households.

Divisions within families were common, affecting both the grassroots and the leadership level of the civilian organisations. The case of the Hiruy brothers represents many others across Addis Ababa: of the four brothers, three - Fikru, Aklilu and Tito - joined the EPRP. Aklilu and Tito acted as successive chairmen of the party's Youth League, earning widespread respect and admiration for their dedication and mobilising skills. The fourth brother, Yohannes, joined Meison instead after becoming a close friend of the organisation's luminary Haile Fida, with whom he had studied in Paris.<sup>60</sup> Yohannes thus found himself in the opposite camp to his brothers. In dividing siblings in such a way, the urban conflict's master cleavage eschewed categorisation along class, ethnic or kinship lines.

In many cases, rival loyalties within families triggered bitter and even violent divisions and disputes. The family of Nigist Adane, one of the most prominent women in early revolutionary politics, provides a telling example.<sup>61</sup> Nigist had been born into a distinguished Tigrayan family and was raised in Addis Ababa. Together with her husband, Desta Tadesse, she had moved to Moscow as a student, training as a medical doctor. While in the Soviet Union, she initially joined the EPRP, putting severe strain on

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59. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 28.

60. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

61. See the brief biography of Nigist Adane in Salem Mekuria's documentary film **የወንዝ ግዕዝ** ['Deluge'] (Channel 4 Television, 1996).

her marriage, since her husband had become a Meison member. Soon however, for reasons that remain unclear, she changed her political allegiance. She rejected the EPRP and became, in the words of a fellow Meison member, "one of the extremists within Meison."<sup>62</sup> Upon her return to Ethiopia, she joined Meison's leadership and was appointed to the central committee of POMOA. There she soon made a name for herself as "a very strong character, who stood by her ideas and was courageous."<sup>63</sup> Uniquely among POMOA's central committee members, she dared to openly challenge Mengistu Haile Mariam, attracting his ire as well as her colleagues' admiration.

While Nigist rose through the ranks of Meison, her brothers became active members of the EPRP. Family relations soured. Suspecting her brothers to be active in the EPRP's urban defense squads, she sought to avoid them, shunning the parental home. "Both [Nigist and her brothers] held ideology higher than family links," fellow Meison activist Girma Bashe suggests; "she would abandon, she would sacrifice anything - including brothers, sisters and parents - for the cause of Meison. And that is what she did."<sup>64</sup> Tensions intensified further when one of her brothers was killed by the regime. Her surviving siblings vehemently criticised Nigist for working with the government that had murdered her brother.<sup>65</sup> Nigist, for her part, persisted in her political convictions and loyalties. Her parents had to live with the agony of a divided family and ultimately witness the death of more children, including Nigist herself. She was murdered in detention in 1979, two years after Meison's alliance with the Derg ended.<sup>66</sup>

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62. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

63. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

64. Interview, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012.

65. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

66. Amnesty International, AI 24/05/80, 22 April 1980.

The faultlines of the Terror are remembered to run even more divisively through the family of the film-maker Ermias Wolde Amlak.<sup>67</sup> Born into a large family of nine brothers and two half-brothers, Ermias recalls several of his siblings becoming active within the local EPRP structure during his youth. A half-brother, Yonas, who "was like a black sheep in the family" and little known to his brothers, had been serving in the Imperial Bodyguard. Soon after the revolution and the dissolution of his unit, he officially left the military. Several of his brothers, Ermias recalls, "accepted him with open hands." They shared the same house, and Yonas shared in his brothers' political and social lives. "They became close", according to Ermias, "and they actually made him a member [of the EPRP]. But what they didn't know is that he still had contact with the military." One night, both Yonas and Elias, a brother who was an active EPRP member, were arrested and taken to *Makelawi*, the central prison. As customary, the family supplied food for the new detainees. But after several days rumours reached them that Yonas "had disappeared from prison". Reports that he had been seen in various parts of town were brought to the family. "Then we found out that he was the one who actually led Elias to prison."

The saga of family adversity did not end there. Another half-brother, who was a Captain in the Army, "was one of the senior interrogators" in charge at the prison. Elias never left *Makelawi* alive. While reports that he suffered and withstood severe torture have reached the family since, the precise role of his half-brother in Elias's ordeal remains unknown. "That's the revolution", Ermias commented dryly after recounting his family's experiences; "at that time brothers killed their brothers."

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67. The following account is based on an interview with Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

Undoubtedly, there were also many cases in which the angst of the Terror, the shared experience of violence or the daily care for imprisoned or wounded relatives brought families closer together or demonstrated the strength of familial ties.<sup>68</sup> However, the experiences of the Hiruy brothers, of the Adane siblings and of the Wolde Amlak family illustrate how families across Addis Ababa were torn apart in the context of the Terror. Opposing allegiances and experiences of violence resulted in disunity and alienation. Social ties were eroded even at the domestic level. Abbink has argued that experiences of the Terror undermined any notion of 'social contract' or 'trust' between the state and the public.<sup>69</sup> This is true particularly because of the Terror's intrusion into the private sphere, breaching the domestic security and liberty of the urban population. The private homes into which many urban Ethiopians withdrew from public life in the aftermath of the Terror were thus scarred retreats, not a remaining sphere left unharmed by the Terror.

The widespread disillusionment with the public promise of progress, which Ethiopia's cities had embodied throughout the twentieth century, is reflected in population figures. Since the early 1960s, Addis Ababa had been growing by about seven percent per year. From 1976 to 1984, by contrast, its population shrank by more than three percent per year as youths were executed or fled, conscripted citizens died in combat and the post-war period's entrenched rural-urban migration pattern, which had seen a steady trend towards urbanisation, was reversed.<sup>70</sup>

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68. Tadelech Wolde Mikael, for example, attested to the strength she drew from her close relation with her mother during her long prison years: interview, 30 March 2012.

69. Abbink, 'Transformations of violence', 72.

70. Dereje Workayehu, 'Police and policing in Addis Ababa', 77-8.

The same disillusionment and retreat from public political life became a contributing factor to the reinvigoration of urban Ethiopia's religious life. Through the upheavals and socio-cultural changes of the Terror, theistic faith and observance not only retained but reinforced its prominent role in the capital's social fabric. Faith constituted a central element of the older generations' response to the breakdown of social and moral order. Concomitantly, the decline of religious life among urban youths was reversed during the Terror. Some young radicals quietly returned to the faith of their pre-revolutionary days when faced with the daily realities of existential danger.<sup>71</sup> Others abandoned their political activism in the context of the agony and widespread disillusionment caused by the Terror. As Shiferaw Bekele argues, many fell back onto Ethiopian religion to provide them with "immediate solace".<sup>72</sup>

A sizeable majority of these lapsed revolutionaries came from Orthodox families. But the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, again co-opted into state nationalism and hence into regime politics during the Ogaden war and lacking in modernist appeal, was ill-equipped to address the generation's disenchantment. Evangelical churches that had made inroads across southern and urban Ethiopia were better prepared. These churches' emphasis on conversion and personal salvation provided a clean break from exercises and experiences of revolutionary violence. Their expositions of the Bible offered a meta-narrative to replace and redeem the now defunct Marxist hope.<sup>73</sup> And their congregations and home groups provided places of forgiveness and comfort, similar in structure to revolutionary cell groups but relatively free from the political divisions that

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71. See for example Mekonnen Getu, *The Undreamt: an Ethiopian transformation* (CTRC: Pasig City, 2004), passim; Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 62.

72. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

73. cf. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 1-8, 82-3.

were tearing apart the fabric of urban society.<sup>74</sup> The Evangelical revival, perhaps one of socialist Ethiopia's most surprising legacies, began to gather its momentum during the Terror. The invigoration of urban religious life was perhaps most evident in Evangelical churches. But it was by no means limited to these. Less conspicuously, mosques and Orthodox churches similarly began to rejuvenate.<sup>75</sup> In spite of the growing entanglement of Orthodox and Muslim leaders in regime politics in the course of 1977, churches and mosques remained some of the only urban spaces whose language and practice were not overtly dominated by revolutionary politics.

The revival of religious faith and practice was by no means a strictly private phenomenon. While it was closely intertwined with a widespread retreat from public political life, the religious sphere was scarcely apolitical. Rather, religious faith and practice provided an alternative register by which to conceptualise, discuss and offer critiques of the political and social situation. Tibebe Eshete provides a telling example of the subtle but powerful political use of religious registers: countering the common slogan that the 'the revolution is above everything', used to demand political obedience and loyalty, a popular gospel song proclaimed *Getachen new kehulum belay* - 'it is our Lord who is above everything'.<sup>76</sup> God, not the revolution, was sovereign. Such subtle resistance, employing the resources of religious faith, allowed citizens to resist the state's absolutist claims on the public sphere and on their lives. It provided room for the exercise of agency in tight corners.

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74. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 285.

75. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

76. Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 278-83.

## **Violence in the neighbourhood**

Much has already been said about the government's lowest administrative unit, the Kebele. The previous chapter inquired into the role Addis Ababa's Kebeles as well as the capital's many prisons played in the officially sanctioned Red Terror of late 1977 and early 1978. In the following two sections, we shall return to these defining arenas to examine how Ethiopia's revolutionary violence was experienced within them.

Kebeles provided a defining arena for the urban Terror. Initially doubling as community centres and as semi-autonomous arms of the regime at the local level, many Kebele offices became foci of both contestation and revolutionary violence. Following their establishment in August 1975, many Kebeles swiftly developed into centres of local activism. Youth Associations were formed in Kebeles and became popular with young residents.<sup>77</sup> Their study groups were not only places of heated debate, they also acted as generators of local knowledge concerning political opinions and affiliations in the neighbourhood.<sup>78</sup> Who belonged to which organisation "was a given" among local youths,<sup>79</sup> with severe consequences once political cleavages militarised.

When Youth Associations were banned and the authority invested into local administrations expanded in October 1976,<sup>80</sup> Kebeles increasingly functioned as instruments of coercion. Compulsory political education classes were held for

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77. Tesfu Kefyalew, 'Organisational structure', 52.

78. Interview, Dawit Terefe, 27 December 2011.

79. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

80. Tesfu Kefyalew, 'Organisational structure', 51-2.

residents.<sup>81</sup> Attendance at political rallies and demonstrations was monitored and enforced.<sup>82</sup> From March 1977 onwards, 'mass-confession' sessions also became regular features in many Kebeles. At these compulsory meetings, the chairperson "would get up and explain that he had a list of EPRP operatives and sympathizers in his hand and that everyone had to confess" or be confronted with revolutionary justice.<sup>83</sup> Due to the politics of local knowledge, whereby a person's political views or affiliations were commonly recognised in the wider community, these sessions were particularly successful at Kebele level.

Many of those who turned themselves in at such meetings were retrained as local Kebele guards or as assistant interrogators. Such appointments were often ruthlessly effective: as one informant commented, "if a person who knew you as an EPRP member becomes your interrogator, there is no way out."<sup>84</sup> Neophyte interrogators became part of a developed structure of systematic torture and abuse within local administrations. Across the city, Kebele offices were converted into temporary jail cells.<sup>85</sup> These cells may have been notionally illegal, but the fact that they were common across the city indicates consistent regime endorsement. Thousands of urban youths were detained and tortured at such makeshift Kebele prisons.<sup>86</sup> Violence experienced in Kebele buildings tended to be more "intimate" than at central prisons, in the dual sense suggested by Joanna Bourke:<sup>87</sup> on the one hand it was cruder in method, consisting largely of

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81. Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa*, 242-3.

82. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*, 51-5.

83. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 6.

84. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

85. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

86. Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*, 192.

87. See Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, passim.

various forms of beating and burning.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand it was more personal in nature, as perpetrators and victims often knew each other. Invariably, personal and local concerns, relations and histories defined this violence and its memory.<sup>89</sup>

Particularly for female detainees, sexual violence represented a common feature of experiences of detention in Kebele offices. In her memoirs, Felekech Metaferia writes about a colleague of hers who also worked as the chairman of her local Kebele: "sometimes when he came to the office he would say, 'I was fanning the fire of revolutionary action the whole night.' That meant he was killing young men and women in the kebele prison. But most of the time it meant he was raping girls."<sup>90</sup> Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik corroborates such accounts, recalling that during his detention he repeatedly witnessed Kebele guards removing girls from cells at night, after chewing Khat and drinking, and gang-raping them.<sup>91</sup> While it has been suggested that in some Kebeles girls agreed to have regular sexual intercourse with investigators in order to avoid more physically violent forms of abuse,<sup>92</sup> such relations too could scarcely be designated as consensual.

Detention facilities in Kebele offices were closely embedded into their neighbourhoods. They experienced high turnover rates, releasing detainees into the immediate vicinity. Families of the imprisoned were responsible for providing them with food on a daily basis, often returning from their visits with reports about their

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88. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

89. Ermias Wolde Amlak to this day knows the Kebele officials who tortured his brothers in his neighbourhood. Cf. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

90. Felekech Metaferia, *Sparkle*, 246.

91. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

92. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

treatment and condition.<sup>93</sup> As a result, accounts of violence at Kebele offices diffused into local communities quickly and through diverse channels. These accounts circulated in local communities, amplified by residents' knowledge or suspicion of safe houses used for interrogations in their neighbourhoods.<sup>94</sup> The systematic abuse and torture experienced by thousands in Kebele administrations thus shaped not only the lives of the victims, but also of their neighbourhoods and communities. If the Kebeles had been intended to democratise the state, they achieved the opposite during the Terror: state violence was brought into the heart of local communities.

### **Incarceration**

The established prisons constituted a final prominent arena of revolutionary violence. For many victims of the Terror, memories of the period remain closely tied to prison experiences. While most were detained for a few traumatic months, many were imprisoned for up to seven years. A few, including one of my informants,<sup>95</sup> remained in prison until the conclusion of Derg rule in 1991. Given the young age of most political prisoners - many were still teenagers, with my youngest informant a mere fourteen years old when he was imprisoned<sup>96</sup> - these were all the more defining experiences. Their memories of prison experiences offer unique perspectives on the ties connecting

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93. Cassiers and Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*, 481-5.

94. SPO, *ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ*, 67-71.

95. Tadelech Haile Mikael, the wife of former student activist and EPRP founder Berhane Meskel.

96. Ermias Wolde Amlak, who was imprisoned at Makelawi and Karchelle.

the personal and the political, individual suffering and the collective struggle in the Ethiopian Terror.<sup>97</sup>

During interviews concerning prison experiences,<sup>98</sup> informants uniformly emphasised desperate living conditions and chronic overcrowding. Like many others, Kahssay Tekeste was interrogated at Makelawi, the central prison at which the Derg's Special Investigation Department was headquartered, before being transferred to the Italian-built prison of Karchelle for another five years.<sup>99</sup> At Makelawi, he recalled sharing a cell with between thirty and forty inmates, many of whom had been brought from outside Addis Ababa for interrogation. Gedion Wolde Amanuel vividly remembered suffocatingly low oxygen levels due to overcrowding in his cell at the Third Police Station, with condensed water dripping from the ceiling. For a time during the peak of the Red Terror in early 1978, conditions there were so cramped that there was insufficient space to lie down in the cell.<sup>100</sup>

Problems of overcrowding were exacerbated by the Derg's liberal detention policies during the Red Terror, which extended to the surrogate imprisonment of family members when a wanted suspect had gone into hiding.<sup>101</sup> This practice often resulted in the imprisonment of older citizens, who were detained if they failed to proffer their family members. As a result, cells designed for twenty inmates could hold forty-five, with guards constrained to use administrators' offices as overflow lockups at night.<sup>102</sup>

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97. Cf. Jocelyn Alexander, 'Political prisoners' memoirs in Zimbabwe: narratives of self and nation', in *Cultural and Social History*, vol.5, no.4 (2008), 395.

98. Fifteen of my informants were subjected to extended periods of imprisonment.

99. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

100. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

101. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

102. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

Overcrowding combined with miserable conditions, including constant proximity to a range of bodily fluids and, in Karchelle at least, a thriving bed bug population.<sup>103</sup> The result was a constant assault on the senses. One informant's exclamation succinctly summarises hours of informants' shared recollection: "the wounds, the stench - and no medicine!".<sup>104</sup>

At Karchelle, Addis Ababa's largest prison, crowds of inmates were mirrored by flocks of visitors. The latter needed to negotiate their way to the front of the visiting throng if they were to see and talk to detainees during restricted visiting hours.<sup>105</sup> Some prisons did not allow for any such contact with the outside world: at the Army's Fourth Division jail, for instance, Meison prisoners were allowed no visitors until 1982.<sup>106</sup> For detainees who were allowed visits, these encounters often provided a rare window onto life outside the prison walls. Not all visits were encouraging; Taffarra Deguefe was told that he should count himself fortunate to be behind bars in light of the killings occurring outside.<sup>107</sup> But for many, the encouragement of family and friends was critical. Thus one informant, Tadelech Haile Mikael, repeatedly highlighted the role of her mother's visits, and of her faith, prayers and support, in sustaining her through more than a decade of imprisonment.<sup>108</sup> Due to the sheer number of detentions, prison realities were closely intertwined with life outside the prison wall, casting a dark shadow over wider urban society.

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103. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

104. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

105. Cassiers and Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*, 488.

106. Yeraswork Admassie, Interview at Addis Ababa University, 20 September 2011.

107. Taffarra Deguefe, *A Tripping Stone. Ethiopian Prison Diary* (Addis Ababa University Press: Addis Ababa, 2003), 169.

108. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

This is particularly true because visitors had more tangible responsibilities than their care for prisoners' spiritual and psychological wellbeing: as customary in Ethiopia, most prisons supplied no food.<sup>109</sup> Outside supporters, usually families, shared the responsibilities of feeding prisoners. This practice put tremendous pressure on families, some of which were deprived of an income but needed to provide food to several relatives in detention facilities across town.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, such visits were fraught with deep anxiety as well as logistical challenge: it was here that relatives were informed of detainees' deaths, usually by having belongings returned as they were told that the person had departed.<sup>111</sup>

Since not all prisoners had outside support and the families of those that did often faced difficulties in meeting demand, routine food shortages marked prison experiences during the Terror.<sup>112</sup> One informant recalls that of thirty-one detainees in his cell, only seven had food regularly brought to them.<sup>113</sup> The result was a remarkable culture of sharing, which comprised essential items like *gabisa* ['woven blankets'] as well as food. Memories of collectivist practices may have been romanticised by some informants, but they were acknowledged by all. As Kahssay Tekeste remarked, "there was no eating or drinking alone"; furthermore, "if someone sent me good food and there is a sick person, the food belonged to that person. That is the law."<sup>114</sup> Original Wolde Giorgis corroborates this account, remembering that when she and other women returned from

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109. Some food was provided at Karchelle. In Makelawi, one of the main detention and interrogation facilities, detainees depended exclusively on outside support.

110. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

111. Commonly, the word used was ተሸኝቶታል, literally 'he has been escorted'.

112. Singer, 'Ethiopia: Human Rights', 674.

113. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

114. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

being brutally tortured, they "were given the best food. Not only that, the women had better food than the men."<sup>115</sup> Such ethics of sharing faced stern tests when their beneficiaries were political opponents or even, following the onset of the Ogaden war, Somali soldiers who had been brought to Makelawi prison for interrogation.<sup>116</sup> But deference to the tortured and the feeble was widely observed. In crowded cells, prisoners took turns to sleep on the floor in a pattern whereby "one's head would be close to another's feet." The few available mattresses were reserved for those returning from being tortured.<sup>117</sup>

Living conditions and food shortages were part of a wider structure of routine humiliation and abuse. Detainees were regularly made to line up naked for inspection. In several instances they were made to crawl over rough gravel on knees and elbows as a form of collective punishment.<sup>118</sup> Daily routines were determined not by the needs of prisoners, but by the whims of their guards: food was only passed on when the latter decided, and "one would go to the toilet when one was called, not when one needed to."<sup>119</sup>

As the security services and the *Nebelbal* elite military unit assumed increasingly prominent roles in the Terror from late 1977 onwards, more suspects were taken directly from arrest to interrogation at central jails. Kebele detention facilities continued to operate at capacity levels, but more of the arrested were taken into custody at central

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115. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

116. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

117. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

118. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

119. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

prisons and did not experience the violence of the Kebeles.<sup>120</sup> While the interrogations of torturers who were trained by Investigation Departments appear to have been more standardised and possibly less personalised, they shared some of the same methods preferred by their Kebele colleagues. The most infamous of these was the *Wofe Ilala* method. Taddele Seyoum provides a largely representative account of experiencing this procedure:

"They gagged me with a cloth and tied my hands and feet together and then suspended my body from a horizontal pole supported at each end by two upright poles. Then they beat the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands with electric cable or a big wooden stick until they were cut and bleeding down to the bone."<sup>121</sup>

This was by far the most common form of torture during the Terror, experienced by thousands of urban Ethiopians. As one informant attested, such beatings could continue for extended periods:

"Sometimes when they beat you [...] they take turns. I remember one fellow saying: 'We won't be tired; you will be.' So one of them would go out onto the corridor and smoke, while the other one would beat me; then he would go out and the other one will come and beat me. What I remember is that because my head was down, and they hit my feet, the blood would splatter on my face. Then they took me down and took me to the interrogator."<sup>122</sup>

The method targeted nerve endings. It also led to heavy bleeding and permanent physiological damage. Second rounds of torture commonly took advantage of these

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120. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

121. Taddele Seyoum, *Life History*, 43.

122. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

already inflicted wounds in order to deepen pain and thereby to achieve swifter confessions. Original Wolde Giorgis recalls that "the second day of torture was worse than the first. [...] I don't know how to explain how much it hurts. And how easy it was to finger your friends!"<sup>123</sup>

Rape, particularly by guards and interrogators, is reported to have commonly occurred in prisons, albeit probably on a smaller scale than in Kebeles.<sup>124</sup> Yet prison experiences, too, were marked by officials' considerable arbitrary powers. Some prison superintendents established infamous reigns of terror over detainees in their charge. According to one informant, Makelawi's Prison Chief Teshome Bayo gained a fearsome reputation among prisoners for his heavy hand, cutting off air supplies or making detainees skip meals at a whim.<sup>125</sup> When the EPRP perpetrated attacks outside the prison, he punished prisoners in retaliation, either collectively or by singling out and punishing one representative prisoner. To the prisoners in his care, Teshome's rule was experienced as absolute. Himself living on the prison's compound, Teshome Bayo was infamous for holding interrogations at unpredictable times. "If the rain would wake him up at midnight, he would cover up, take his gun and come over," Kahssay Tekeste recalled.<sup>126</sup> The smallest distraction or irritation could trigger the torture of an inmate. In prisons as well as in the Kebeles, then, detainees' fortunes were determined both by the systematised structures of torture and by the contingent choices of individual officials.

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123. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, Addis Ababa, 22 March 2012.

124. Interviews, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012 and Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

125. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012; see also Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

126. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

The same arbitrariness also afforded some prisoners unexpected deliverance. The historian Shiferaw Bekele tells of a close acquaintance, Ermias Kebede, who narrowly survived an encounter with a firing squad. Shiferaw recounts how when Ermias was lined up for execution, some of his fellow accused cried for their lives. Others defiantly chanted opposition slogans: "the EPRP shall win", "fascism shall be defeated". But the person standing next in line to Ermias instead cursed the EPRP.<sup>127</sup> One of the executioners overheard his comment and asked to have it repeated to him. He then ordered his release, together with that of Ermias. Both were taken back to prison, whence Ermias was released years later.<sup>128</sup> Such executions in prison were commonly clustered on particular nights of the week, typically Fridays.<sup>129</sup> On the designated evenings, guards would call on cells announcing a list of names. The chosen victims were then led to prison courtyards or driven to the forest edge to face firing squads. One informant recalled the tension and uncertainty in the cells on the eve of these announcements, and the silence observed by prisoners for up to half a day afterwards, an unspoken rule and a way of mourning the dead.<sup>130</sup>

Among the effects of such arbitrary violence were widespread experiences of angst and anxiety. Several informants attested that they found their personalities profoundly altered by such experiences,<sup>131</sup> while anecdotal evidence suggests that mental health conditions manifested frequently during and after imprisonments in the context of the Terror. Prison conditions, torture and existential insecurities were too much for many

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127. "ኢሕአፓ፣ መቃብረሽ ከመቃብራ ብታች ይሁን።" ['EPRP, may your grave be below mine.']

128. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

129. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

130. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

131. "I lost my brothers, but I lost myself also": Ermias Wolde Amlak, interviewed on 7 March 2012; "I lost my happiness throughout my life": Gedion Wolde Amanuel, interviewed on 19 March 2012.

detainees. Some committed suicide in prison, usually following experiences of torture that made even the prisons' scarce means for committing suicide appear feasible.<sup>132</sup> Many others confessed, even beyond their knowledge, in order to terminate experiences of torture. As one victim, who suggests that she succeeded in keeping her lips closed only by knowing of the comprehensiveness of confession required to truly stop interrogations, recalls:

" Once you start to talk you start talking until you talk about your mother's breastfeeding; they will make you talk and talk. People have fingered other people that are not even related to the [political struggle], that are not even in the [party's] structure itself, [but whom] they knew on the streets."<sup>133</sup>

The consequence of such confessions was a concatenation of unsubstantiated accusations, whereby the number of the accused snowballed. Many urban residents were detained and tortured without even having been politically active.

It is sometimes suggested that women held out longer under duress, with victims like Birtukan Degaz and Azeb Girma becoming admired as martyrs in Makelawi.<sup>134</sup> As primary targets of sexual violence, women certainly faced additional threats of abuse. Yet there were also cases in which femininity offered unique possibilities for protection. The extraordinary experience of Tadelech Haile Mikael provides a poignant example: having told her interrogators that she was pregnant in order to gain brief respite from torture, she was taken to hospital and tested. When, to her great relief, the test did

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132. Zewde Wolde Amanuel, for example, committed suicide after having been blinded by torture: Gedion Wolde Amanuel, interviewed on 19 March 2012; cf. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012 on suicides at Makelawi.

133. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

134. An admiring joke at the time asked: "What do they feed the women, that they don't talk at all?"; cf. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

indeed come back positive, she was allowed to give birth in prison and raised her daughter there for seven years. She credits pregnancy and motherhood for protecting her from further torture and from likely execution on at least three occasions.<sup>135</sup>

With political prisoners sharing time and facilities for months and even years, complex social networks evolved in Addis Ababa's detention facilities during the Terror, complete with internal service structures and informal economies. Money scarcely entered the prisons; cigarettes, brought by relatives along with food, became the effective currency of exchange.<sup>136</sup> Cigarettes could be used to buy the small comforts of quotidian prison life, such as bread, tea or minor favours. In Makelawi, some prisoners also pooled their scarce resources into a 'medicine fund', which was administered by an incarcerated medical doctor, remembered affectionately as Gash Dejene. Working for the Police prior to his arrest, he was a man of authority who succeeded in gaining the cooperation of a prison guard. Through this guard he obtained essential medicines, and was given permission to treat prisoners who fell ill or returned from being tortured.<sup>137</sup> Even if limited in its possibilities, such treatment was exceptional. Most prisoners had no recourse to qualified medical attention following experiences of torture,<sup>138</sup> and could at best hope for caring attention or traditional massages of internal bleedings from sympathetic fellow inmates.<sup>139</sup>

Internal service structures in the prisons extended to the provision of education through academic classes. With teachers and lecturers among the prison population,

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135. Interview, Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012.

136. Almost all informants commented on the cigarette-based prison economy, and reflected on the small luxuries they would trade for.

137. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

138. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

139. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

classes were organised at the more permanent detention facilities. Young activists had often abandoned their formal education for the political struggle. Many took up the opportunity to resume it in prison. Some teachers from the highly regarded francophone *Lycée* went to the extent of organising exams at Karchelle.<sup>140</sup> Numerous detainees, including one informant,<sup>141</sup> finished their secondary education in prison. Some went on to have their studies accredited upon release, and used their prison education as foundations for tertiary studies or professional careers.<sup>142</sup>

The tension between the daily realities of abuse and the often sacrificial social ties that defined imprisonment made for contrasting experiences of human relations. As one informant, who had been helped in her recovery from torture wounds by a sympathetic guard, recalls: "you don't forget the cruelty, nor the kindness of people there."<sup>143</sup> Out of a shared predicament could grow solidarity: Ermias Wolde Amlak emphasised that "there was this friendship, this companionship of caring one for another."<sup>144</sup> He also noted the occasional ability to humorously engage with miserable prison conditions,<sup>145</sup> and recalled the strength gleaned from those who were able to cheer others up even after having themselves been tortured.

Solidarity was particularly developed among those who had been imprisoned for a common cause. At least until late 1978, when it transpired that the urban opposition had been effectively dismantled, many found detention to be an incubator for their youthful

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140. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

141. Interview, Akililu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

142. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

143. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

144. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

145. The difficult art of transcending experiences of the Derg's violence through the use of humour is at its best in Hama Tuma, *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor And Other Stories* (Heinemann: London, 1993).

political militancy. The shared struggle justified the personal suffering. At the Army's Fourth Division jail, activists defiantly sang EPRP songs in the evenings, undeterred by the inevitable collective punishment that followed in the mornings.<sup>146</sup> Across Addis Ababa's prisons, EPRP supporters shouted party slogans and sought to affirm one another in their convictions.<sup>147</sup> The singing and preaching of activists being led to their execution has been noted before in the literature.<sup>148</sup> These common acts of defiance were infused with a religious - there is no better moniker - sense of purpose and martyrdom. One informant recalls the impression made by these political martyrs who went to their deaths "[as if] they were going somewhere to be decorated; so straight and so proud!"<sup>149</sup> Such attitudes reveal not only the strengths of political convictions, but equally the cohesion of the social networks that upheld and bolstered these.

Yet solidarity and companionship were but one aspect of relations among prisoners. Tensions were equally rife in the confined and crowded jails, not least between supporters of rival political organisations. Existential necessity meant that the aforementioned ethic of sharing food and living essentials was widely enforced, but this became a source of resentment as well as of generosity. Some prisoners complained about having to support "those *Ihapas* ['EPRP members']" and murmured that fellow prisoners should "let them die."<sup>150</sup> Unexceptionally, detention facilities during the Ethiopian Terror were loci of animosities, rivalries and conflicts among prisoners. On the other hand, prisons became venues for close engagement between some EPRP and

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146. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

147. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

148. See especially the account in Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 140.

149. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012; cf. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*, 158.

150. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

Meison members from August 1977 onwards, as the latter also began to be imprisoned for opposition to the Derg. Prison conditions enforced the extended discussions that had not sufficiently occurred in preceding years. One informant, who had been a member of the EPRP, recalled sharing a cell with Meison's luminary Haile Fida and with the Secretary of the EPRP's Youth League, Tito Hiruy.<sup>151</sup> Founded on the basis of Haile Fida's friendship with Tito's brother Yohannes, and facilitated by a newly shared opposition to military rule, lengthy conversations between the jailed political leaders resulted in new-found agreements and respect.<sup>152</sup> Despite frequent tensions, this pattern of increased discussion and understanding was replicated in jails across Addis Ababa.<sup>153</sup>

While most informants incorporated some positive memories in their accounts of experiences of imprisonment, these were dim lights in dark places. Physically, psychologically and socially, prison experiences during the Terror came at enormous personal costs that had lasting effects for urban Ethiopia. Many of those who survived imprisonment were released with permanent physical injuries incurred from experiences of torture. Lasting damage to feet and hands, the primary targets of the *wofe ilala* method, was particularly common.<sup>154</sup> Mutilation of genital areas, the target of widespread torture methods as well as of sexual violence, left many victims infertile and thereby shaped marital relations and family planning for decades.<sup>155</sup> Similarly

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151. Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

152. Stasi documents suggest that Haile Fida was offered the opportunity of recanting his opposition to military rule and of working with the Derg, but did not sign a prepared confession "for fear of repercussions from his organisation". At present it is impossible to assess the veracity of such claims. Cf. BStU HVA 87, Information on questions concerning developments in Ethiopia, 24 October 1977, 58.

153. See for instance Interviews, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012; Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012; Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

154. E.g. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

155. E.g. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

consequential were psychological effects of prison experiences. No reliable figures exist, but informants unanimously observed that mental health problems in urban Ethiopia proliferated during the late 1970s. Shiferaw Bekele suggests that victims of torture and their mothers appear to have been particularly affected by mental health conditions.<sup>156</sup> Exacerbated by the absence of developed medical support structures, these conditions not only afflicted sufferers but also placed a permanent burden of care on affected families.

Such legacies of prison experiences were complicated by the efforts of some victims to repress or contain memories of their experiences, at times perceived to include socially taboo or shameful elements. Whereas informants for this study were remarkably open about their experiences, some victims have sought to rebuild their lives in the absence of a public engagement with the painful past. One informant spoke of multiple fellow inmates, who had not told their spouses about their prison experiences after more than three decades.<sup>157</sup> Many legacies and memories of imprisonment during the Terror thus remain subtle, covert and not directly accessible to society or researchers. For many victims, for instance, memories of abuse remained inscribed in Addis Ababa's urban geography long after the event. Once familiar and friendly locations now mapped out an mnemonic landscape of trauma and terror. As one informant commented concerning Minilik's old palace, where he had been detained and tortured: "before, I liked to pass there, for its historical interest. Now, it makes me

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156. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

157. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

shiver."<sup>158</sup> For victims of collective violence, perceptions of the city as a social environment themselves were thus deeply altered during this period.

The legacies of systematic executions and regimes of torture that occurred in Ethiopia's prisons during the Terror extended far beyond their immediate victims. Many of those who were imprisoned, tortured and killed were sons or daughters, husbands or wives, and fathers or mothers. Their deaths or impairments not only left their families bereft, but frequently also deprived of essential income. For many survivors, the agonies of loss were exacerbated by chronic experiences of poverty.<sup>159</sup> Experiences of incarceration thus formed an integral part of the Terror's impact on Addis Ababa's social fabric.

### **Expatriate residents' experiences of the Terror**

Widely regarded as outsiders to Ethiopia's political rivalries and less rooted in local social networks, Addis Ababa's many expatriates experienced the urban Terror differently from their Ethiopian neighbours. The Ethiopian capital was a hub of diplomatic activity, home to the headquarters of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the focus of geopolitical attention on the Horn of Africa in the context of

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158. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012. Recent transformation to Addis Ababa's urban topography, such as the building of the new African Union Headquarters on the site of Karchelle prison, have not only altered such landscapes of memory but also raised questions concerning the collective memorialisation of the Terror. See de Waal, 'A permanent human rights memorial', *passim*; Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, 'Alem Bekagn: The African Union's accidental Human Rights Memorial' in *African Affairs*, 112, 447 (2013), *passim*.

159. *Mehabers* ['mutual help associations'] of relatives of Red Terror victims were formed after the demise of the Derg to alleviate such poverty. See interview with Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012, who administers a *Mehaber* of mothers of Red Terror victims.

the global Cold War.<sup>160</sup> Alongside the resultant diplomatic corps, the capital's many expatriates comprised, inter alia, aid workers, international advisors, missionaries and deeply embedded communities of Italian, Greek and Armenian immigrants.

Many Western European and American expatriates harboured an orientalist fascination with Christian highland Ethiopia. This fascination was rooted in a historical interpretation uniquely embodied by the imperial regime and its founding myths. It characterised academic scholarship on Ethiopia until the revolution, and continues to be marketed by Ethiopia's Tourism Commission to this day.<sup>161</sup> The *ancien régime* of Haile Selassie I, which had of course also been a loyal ally of the West in the global fight against communism, was thus remembered fondly. The Derg, on the other hand, was from the outset regarded with suspicion and antipathy. As one disgruntled British resident of Addis Ababa rather prematurely reported to her Embassy, "Haile Selassie took 25 years to improve the economy - the Dergue [sic] destroyed it in two years."<sup>162</sup>

The harassment routinely experienced by many Westerners and non-Ethiopian Africans, often carried out by zealous low-level officials, did little to allay such antipathies. American families living in Addis Ababa were routinely harassed at checkpoints, while giant posters depicting victorious Ethiopian troops marching over a fallen Uncle Sam and declaring "Go Home, Yankee" not only conveyed messages about the Derg's ideological alignment but also about withheld hospitality.<sup>163</sup> Diplomats enjoyed

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160. See the discussion in Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (hereafter FAOHC), Interview with Ambassador Arthur. W. Hummel Jr., 27 February 1995.

161. For an ingenious survey of intercultural imaginings of highland Ethiopia, see W.B. Carnochan, *Golden Legends: Images of Abyssinia, Samuel Johnson to Bob Marley* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2008).

162. Quoted in FCO 31/2257-20, D. Day (British Embassy Addis Ababa) to A.G. Munro (EAD), 14 March 1978.

163. Bascom, *An American Boyhood in Ethiopia*, 230.

no immunity from such treatment. European and African envoys based in the capital, including the General Secretary of the OAU, issued a joint complaint to the Derg about the Terror's interference in their missions:

"We are unable to do our work due to the lack of security. [...] It is impossible to convene a conference in Addis Ababa. [Kebele officials] are abusing our staff and our property. They call us 'Imperialists' and we are stopped and searched on the road despite our flags flying visibly on our cars."<sup>164</sup>

The US Deputy Ambassador recalls being subjected to such treatment when he left town to visit a monastery with the visiting Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of Washington, DC.<sup>165</sup> The pair were detained by local officials, and asked to sign a statement declaring that they had attempted to make contact with "unfriendly elements". Such experiences generated little sympathy for Ethiopia's revolution and its coercive methods among expatriates who identified with the Western side of the Iron Curtain.

The Derg and its revolutionary violence were assessed rather more favourably by many expatriates from socialist bloc countries. Some of the Soviet lecturers that had taken the place of American and Canadian academic staff at Addis Ababa University were delighted to experience in Ethiopia the revolution they had missed in Russia. One of these lecturers, Professor Korovan, saw in the Red Terror a clear parallel to Russian history and the mark of a true revolution.<sup>166</sup> Such enthusiasm for revolutionary violence was not, however, shared by all citizens of the Derg's socialist bloc allies. By April 1978, Soviet and East German advisors are reported to have been appalled by the form

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164. SPO, **ደግሞ ያዘለ ዶሴ**, 52.

165. FAOHC, Interview with Deputy Ambassador Owen Roberts, 11 February 1991.

166. Katz, 'Children's revolution', 8-9.

and scope of the Red Terror.<sup>167</sup> Nor was Professor Korovan's enthusiasm about being in Ethiopia reciprocated by his students, who routinely complained about the barely comprehensible English of their new Eastern European lecturers. Indeed, it has been convincingly argued that the increasing Russian presence in Addis Ababa furthered the widespread disillusionment with socialism generated by the Terror: if socialism had been widely interpreted through sympathetic western lenses during the early years of revolutionary Ethiopia, it was increasingly burdened by encounters with Soviet realities after 1977.<sup>168</sup> Eastern Europeans' close association with the military regime may have spared them the harassment dispensed by petty officials to other expatriates; it did little to endear them to their Ethiopian host society.

Irrespective of expatriates' assessment of the Red Terror, the urban violence represented a reality from which no urban residents could insulate themselves. Like their Ethiopian neighbours, Addis Ababa's expatriates learned that the Terror could not be confined. Its claims were comprehensive, and on occasion it penetrated violently into their domestic sphere.

Thus on 8 May 1977, in the context of the Derg's second search campaign, the violent confrontations between the government and its opponents enveloped the family home of Sergeant Ryan, who was in Ethiopia as part of a mapping aid project by the British Department of Overseas Survey.<sup>169</sup> The search campaign, largely carried out by soldiers after the discomfiting disarray that had attended the Kebele-led search in March, involved the imposition of a strict curfew for the weekend; road blocks were set

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167. FCO 31/2257-36. Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, 27 April 1978.

168. Colburn, 'The tragedy of Ethiopia's intellectuals', 143-4.

169. Cf. OD 6/2043, Security of Department of Overseas Survey personnel in Ethiopia, 1977.

up across the capital, and all movement was closely monitored. In the afternoon, "a great deal of shooting" erupted in the immediate vicinity of the Ryans' household in the tranquil Bole neighbourhood.<sup>170</sup> Soon after, the family's maid found a wounded youth, presumably an EPRP activist, hiding in the toilet of the servants' quarters. Sergeant Ryan immediately contacted his programme coordinator for advice, while giving his guard the consequential order to inform nearby troops of the intruder's presence. Within minutes, troops entered the Ryan family's compound "to deal with the wounded person." The result was a shoot-out on the grounds, with bullets being fired through the living room window, which "only narrowly missed Mrs Ryan and caused great distress and shock to the children."

The young man who had hidden inside the servants' quarters was killed, and his body was dumped on the residential road outside the compound. In the evening, the house was subjected to a comprehensive search by troops, perceived by the Ryans to be "in a nervous and 'trigger-happy' state", before the family were allowed to leave with a delegation from the British Embassy that had since arrived. Their domestic safety violated, the family moved out of their home to the programme coordinator's compound on the same evening, and left Ethiopia soon after the incident on Mrs Ryan's request.

Expatriate experiences of the Terror were most frequent on the streets and in the public realm, where Ethiopia's revolutionary violence had become an everyday reality. A simple walk to the shops could bring any residents and their children face to face with a public execution, as the missionary Jeanette Corey experienced in March 1977:

"[Jeanette] walked from SIM's Addis Ababa headquarters down the hill to the grocery store at the end of the street. Her two preschool children held on

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170. OD 6/2042-20A, Report on staff security, 8 May 1977.

to one arm, and two others [sic] youngsters were on the other. As a car stopped about three meters from Jeannette, a man was shoved out on to the ground; a burst of automatic rifle fire made sure that he was dead. Jeanette hurriedly pulled the children into a shop, but not before they had all had a chance to absorb the grisly scene."<sup>171</sup>

Such encounters with the Terror's killings were commonplace for Addis Ababa's expatriates. Few, however, became the targets of lethal violence themselves. The only recorded casualty appears to have been the Englishman Dr William Hastings Morton, a man who got more deeply involved in Ethiopia's revolutionary politics than most other foreigners.

Dr Hastings Morton was a geologist and University lecturer who, like Sergeant Ryan, had gone to Ethiopia to work for the British Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM). ODM files are surprisingly silent concerning Dr Hastings Morton's work and activities, but leading EPRP members remember him as a dedicated activist and supporter. On several occasions, he provided his residence as a comparatively safe venue for important party meetings.<sup>172</sup> On 10 March 1977,<sup>173</sup> Dr Hastings Morton was shot by a factory's Abyot Tebeka squad on the southern outskirts of Addis Ababa. According to a Derg news release, the squad had foiled his "espionage attempts" and stopped his attempted flight back into the centre of the capital.<sup>174</sup> Perhaps more probable is Kiflu Tadesse's recollection that Dr Hastings Morton was intercepted while using his role as a foreigner to safely escort EPRP members out of Addis Ababa in the

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171. Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror*, 110.

172. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 63-5.

173. The precise date is only mentioned in the Commons and Lords Hansard, in response to a question concerning the safety of British citizens in Ethiopia: HC Deb 22 March 1977, vol 928 cc 527.

174. *Independent*, 14 March 1977, 'Briton Called Spy'.

build-up to the first comprehensive search campaign.<sup>175</sup> The ODM's only comment on the incident was that "Dr Morton the geologist [...] had been deliberately shot after he had stopped his vehicle and was standing with his arms raised."<sup>176</sup> Both in his life as an anti-Derg activist and in his resultant death in the Ethiopian Terror, Dr Hastings Morton was an outlier among Addis Ababa's expatriates.

While other assassination attempts on foreigners are recorded, including on an American and a Swedish diplomat returning home late at night,<sup>177</sup> none of these were successful. Overall, expatriates in Addis Ababa lived much safer lives during the Terror than their Ethiopian neighbours. As one US diplomat remarked, the Red Terror may have been characterised by "bazookas, machine guns, and rifles being fired every night [...], and [by] people getting killed;" but "fortunately, they were not foreigners."<sup>178</sup>

Nonetheless, Ethiopia's revolutionary violence sufficed to shrink Addis Ababa's expatriate communities. Between April and July 1977, more than 100 Britons left Ethiopia.<sup>179</sup> Many of those tied to the country by working contracts considered at least sending their families home.<sup>180</sup> At the US Embassy, long discussions were held on whether to evacuate during the height of the Terror.<sup>181</sup> Ultimately, it was decided to stay in order to maintain an American presence, and the Embassy even flew in a fluent

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175. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 196.

176. OD 6/2043-4, Report on the security situation in Addis Ababa, 20 March 1977.

177. FCO 31/2257-20, D. Day (British Embassy Addis Ababa) to A.G. Munro (EAD), 14 March 1978.

178. FAOHC, Interview with DCM Arthur T. Tienken, 12 June 1989.

179. Compare FCO 31/2079-53, Embassy Report from Addis Ababa, 22 April 1977, which mentions 700 British citizens in Ethiopia; and FCO 31/2081-148, Assessment of UK interests in the Horn, 14 July 1977, which notes that 600 UK citizens remain in the country.

180. OD 6/2043-41, Report on the security situation in Addis Ababa, 1 October 1977.

181. FAOHC, Interview with DCM Arthur T. Tienken, 12 June 1989.

Amharic speaker in order to operate a broadcast-interception post from its premises.<sup>182</sup> With American interest in the country greatly reduced following the abandonment of the military base at Kagnev, however, the US Embassy was "virtually dissolved", operating at minimum capacity with only 28 staff.<sup>183</sup>

Another group of expatriates that largely sought to leave the country during the Red Terror was the Armenian community. Closely connected to Ethiopia by a shared non-Chalcedonian Orthodox faith, Armenians have long been present in the country. In Addis Ababa, a small community dates to the aftermath of the Armenian genocide. In the context of the urban Terror, these diasporic Armenians sought to leave the country, becoming the main applicants for US immigration visas.<sup>184</sup> The only expatriate groups that grew in this period were those consisting of workers and advisors sent to Ethiopia by the country's new socialist bloc allies. These were largely on short-term appointments and - ignoring the very brief influx of thousands of Cuban soldiers - few in number.<sup>185</sup>

Those expatriates who remained in Addis Ababa accommodated themselves to the revolutionary Terror and learned to resume daily routines in its presence. Many became accustomed to the experience of "going to bed every night to the sound of machine gunfire just a few hundred yards away."<sup>186</sup> US consular officer Elizabeth Raspolic

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182. BStU MfS Arbeitsbereich Neiber 21, Interview with Deputy Ambassador Owen Roberts, 11 February 1991. The East German Stasi had warned the Ethiopian Security Services of the dangers of such foreign surveillance, which it considered likely in light of dated detection technologies: BStU 'Bericht zum Aufenthalt einer Delegation des MfS in Addis Abeba' ['Report on the stay of a MfS delegation in Addis Ababa'], 27 September 1977, 63.

183. FAOHC, Interview with DCM Arthur T. Tienken, 12 June 1989.

184. FAOHC, Interview with Consular Officer Elizabeth Raspolic, 12 February 1989.

185. During the peak of collaboration between the countries, East Germans in Ethiopia numbered merely "55 with their families": MfS HA IX, Report on relations between GDR and Ethiopia, date missing (early 1978?), 126.

186. FAOHC, Interview with Chargé d'Affaires Richard C. Matheron, March 1989.

recalls her eventful initiation into the Terror's normalised violence during her first week in Addis Ababa in 1978. At the farewell party of her predecessor, shots were fired close to the house. Her hostess dropped to the floor, crawled to the French doors that opened onto a small terrace and closed them. She then turned to her guests and invited them to continue enjoying the buffet table.<sup>187</sup> The violence of the Terror had become a normalised aspect of everyday reality for Addis Ababa's expatriates.

Some foreigners, however, went beyond the symbolic shutting of domestic blinds in their engagement with the surrounding violence. On 8 March 1977, another expatriate dinner party was interrupted by the sound of a nearby explosion. The guests turned off all lights and rushed to the balcony, where they heard voices chanting "down with the Derg".

"This continued for about five minutes and we thought they must be students. Then we heard a round of firing followed by a deathly silence and we knew, without a doubt, that they were dead."<sup>188</sup>

The hostess of the dinner party was Gladys Buck, a British teacher who had lived in Ethiopia since 1947 and had founded a kindergarten and a primary school in the capital. We learn about her experiences from a six-page report on the urban Terror, which she sent to the British Embassy.<sup>189</sup> When the curfew lifted at 5am on the morning following the dinner party, the corpses of twenty-two young men and of a pregnant woman were lying on the street. "Extremely upset" by such experiences, Mrs Buck "made it a point of duty" to drive through the streets when curfew was lifted in the mornings and "to

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187. FAOHC, Interview with Consular Officer Elizabeth Raspolic, 12 February 1989.

188. FCO 31/2257-21, Gladys Buck report, 20 March 1978.

189. FCO 31/2257-21, Gladys Buck report, 20 March 1978.

witness what had been done [in terms of killings] throughout the night." During these drives she regularly observed "the bodies of mostly young people scattered in the back lanes". When bodies began to be left on the streets throughout the day a few months later, similar experiences became an integral part of daily life for all residents of Addis Ababa.

The group of expatriates that arguably encountered the Ethiopian Terror most closely were missionaries, who tended to be more closely integrated into their host societies than other foreigners. While most missionaries worked in rural areas, many spent an induction period in Addis Ababa or staffed missions in the capital. Here, they and their families had to constantly confront the urban violence of the Terror on the streets and through the experiences of their fellow Church members.<sup>190</sup> Like Mrs Buck, SIM missionary John Cumbers foregrounds the effects of regular encounters with displayed corpses in his account of life during the Terror:

"Soon we learned that the 'Red Terror' had begun in earnest. Each morning our children traveling to and from their school would see bodies on the sidewalk with labels stuck on them stating which doctrine of the revolutionary code the unfortunate victim had violated."<sup>191</sup>

Due to the transnational nature of their work and funding, missionaries regularly wrote to supporters, and sometimes to their governments or the press, concerning their experiences and the plight of their Churches. In March 1978 such a report, written by the German missionary Gunnar Hasselblatt under the pseudonym of Hans Eerik, was

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190. Bascom, *An American Boyhood in Ethiopia*, passim.

191. Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror*, 111.

published by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany and by *The Times* in London.<sup>192</sup>

The article was fiercely critical of the role of the international community, and of Addis Ababa's diplomats in particular, in ignoring the Terror: "driven in limousines past [...] corpses, they hear the shootings and then they go on drinking whisky at parties", Hasselblatt accused. More consequential were his detailed and graphic, if in some places overstated, accounts of the Terror in Addis Ababa: the article revealed the routine torture and execution of teenagers, the ubiquitous public display of dead bodies, and especially the social fear and lethal repercussions of speaking out against the government-sponsored Red Terror. This was the first eyewitness account to reach a wide audience outside Ethiopia. In London the article "aroused considerable concern in Parliament" and caused a flood of perturbed letters from the public to MPs.<sup>193</sup>

Such sporadic accounts of the Terror's violence and abuses reopened an old register in the international imagination of Ethiopia. As in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>194</sup> the oft-mythologised highlands of the Horn again became associated with present social disorder and violence as much as with past imperial glories; they again became associated with savagery as much as Christianity. Soon, these reports would merge with the extensively broadcast images of the 1984 famine to define international perceptions and narratives of Ethiopia under the Derg. Within the country, the lived experiences of

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192. *The Times* (Gunnar Hasselblatt aka Hans Eerik), 'Boy of 14 is shot dead after being tortured in Ethiopian Red Terror', 22 March 1978.

193. FCO 58/1417-16 and -17, EAD report on Human Rights in Ethiopia, April 1978.

194. See for example the hugely popular accounts by British travellers and soldiers: James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (J. Ruthven: London, 1805); Walter Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country* (Longmans, Green and Co.: London, 1868); Clements Robert Markham, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (Macmillan: London, 1869)

the Terror years gave rise to very different sets of narratives, often highly politicised and divisive. These narratives are the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 6 - Past and Present

### The memorialisation of collective violence

Memories of the Ethiopian Terror remain at once traumatic and deeply contested. For many participants, recollections of the period are persistently painful and intensely personal. But such memories have also been collectively constructed, negotiated and represented, giving rise to shared and public narratives. These narratives are the subject of this chapter. Where the previous chapter examined experiences of the Terror, drawing heavily on the remembrance of participants, this chapter focuses on the wider narrative frameworks within which such memories are embedded, examining their patterns and their purposes.

From the outset, accounts of the Terror have been highly politicised and accordingly disputed.<sup>1</sup> Interpretations of the period's violence have been used to claim or to undermine political legitimacy, to vindicate contentious actions or to construct collective identities. Readily distinguishable interpretative communities have emerged, defined by high degrees of internal coherence. For victim associations and political groups targeted by the Terror, shared patterns of memory organisation have been integral to the public rationalisation of experiences and actions, as well as to the construction of identities in the present. Concurrently, subsequent regimes have used state-commissioned narratives of the Terror as political instruments. Thus on the one hand, Derg narratives celebrated the Terror and its successful suppression of urban

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1. For some of the first accounts that made it into print, see Ethiopian Revolution Information Center, *The Men-in-Uniform in the Ethiopian Revolution* (1978); Nega Ayele and John Markakis, *Class and Revolution* (1978); Michael Chege, 'The Revolution Betrayed' (1979).

dissent as marks of a true revolution. On the other hand, the EPRDF regime has used its ousting and prosecution of the Derg, which has been constantly identified with the human rights abuses of the Red Terror, as political currency.

The close ties between particular narrative structures and political organisations have led to a common prioritisation of macro-political differences in accounting for the Terror's violence. The complexities and ambiguities of the period are ex-post facto streamlined or covered up with reference to the political programmes and conflicts of the dominant groups.<sup>2</sup> In this, alternative narrative traditions resemble one another. Within this common framework, however, their interpretations of the causes, dynamics and effects of the Terror vary considerably. In light of the foundational role such narrative structures play in the construction of identities and legitimacy in the present, it should come as no surprise that the memorialisation of the Terror remains profoundly contested. For many participants, the confrontations of the period found continuation in struggles over its interpretation.<sup>3</sup> All the dominant narratives have been shaped by former participants, and in many cases the protagonists of the Terror have also become its popular historiographers. As one informant lamented, many continue to feel invested in particular narratives to the extent that "they think they own the history" and refuse to countenance alternative experiences and perspectives.<sup>4</sup> As with other histories of collective violence "struggles over the possession and interpretation of memories are deep, frequent, and bitter."<sup>5</sup>

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2. Cf. Kalyvas, 'Ontology', 487.

3. These politicised narratives of the Terror thus bear out Foucault's inversion of Clausewitz's famous dictum: "politics is the continuation of war by other means". Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76* (Picador: London, 2003), 47.

4. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

5. David Thelen, 'Memory and American history', in *Journal of American History*, vol.73, no.4 (1989), 1126.

This chapter examines prominent narratives about the Terror that have found expression in diverse textual, institutional and physical spaces. These narratives differ considerably in at least three regards: firstly, in their understanding of the period's defining dynamics, as they seek to accuse, to explain or to exculpate particular actions or groups. Secondly, in their media of communication, which range from propaganda texts to memorials to criminal trials. And finally, in the widely varying popular currency of competing narratives: Derg texts, for instance, primarily found a hearing among those, within and outside the country, committed to Ethiopia's military regime by particular party lines. The Red Terror trials, on the other hand, evoked widespread public engagement with the period, as framed by EPRDF narratives, although interest waned as proceedings dragged on for almost fifteen years.

Five prominent narratives of the Terror, overlapping in some aspects but conflicting in others, are surveyed and examined in this chapter. It begins by focusing on accounts commissioned by the Derg itself, widely promulgated through government outlets until the late 1980s. These accounts not only justified the mass violence of the Terror, but also sought to invoke it as a founding motif of socialist Ethiopia.

Secondly, this chapter will examine the development of a shared narrative about the Terror among participants who had been members or sympathisers of the EPRP. Emphasising themes of popular opposition to military rule, of selfless dedication to revolutionary change and of brutal state repression, this narrative has arguably been most prominent in journalistic, academic and popular discussions of the period. It has been primarily expressed - and indeed constructed - in a number of defining texts by

former party leaders and external supporters.<sup>6</sup> Popular and sharing some defining traits with the memorialisation efforts of victim associations and EPRDF projects, this narrative's densities and silences are reflective of wider patterns in the memorialisation of the period.

Texts closely associated with early revolutionary Ethiopia's other large civilian political organisation, Meison, form the third part of this chapter. Less widely shared and less standardised than EPRP accounts,<sup>7</sup> this narrative is mainly espoused by former members of the movement.<sup>8</sup> Meison-associated texts emphasise the genuine revolutionary accomplishment that resulted from the organisation's ill-fated alliance with the Derg. Equally, they privilege the Red Terror perpetrated after Meison's move underground over earlier violence, thereby casting the organisation primarily as a victim of revolutionary violence. On a number of central questions, Meison-associated narratives continue to present an alternative perspective to the most commonly held interpretations of the period.

Following the demise of the Derg in 1991, two institutions have defined public engagement with memories of the Terror: the EPRDF-instituted Red Terror trials and the 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum' that opened in Addis Ababa in 2010. Both institutions have given expression to memories of the Terror. Both have also been beset by difficulties and controversies that have weakened their potential to generate public closure and a societal consensus concerning the Terror's memorialisation. This chapter

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6. See especially Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation* and Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation* Parts I and II; most influential in academic circles was Nega Ayele and John Markakis, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*.

7. The most reflective and defining text for this narratives is Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጠሉ ረጅም ጉዞ [A long journey cut short].

8. In interviews with former Meison members, a high degree of affinity between testimonials - and with Andargachew Assegid's text - was notable on defining issues.

traces the narratives about Ethiopia's revolutionary violence presented through these memorialisation projects.

The varied interpretations of the Terror's violence examined in this chapter are hence reflected in empirical texts, sites and institutions. These are *lieux de mémoire* in Pierre Nora's sense,<sup>9</sup> physical or textual sites of memory through which collective narratives are embodied and represented. However, not all narratives concerning the period have been thus epitomised. Dissenting voices have been a constant feature of the memorialisation process, while individuals and independent organisations like the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center have made conscious efforts to transcend the moulds of entrenched narratives. This chapter completes its survey of the Terror's memorialisation process to date by examining some of these alternative interpretations. It concludes by discussing the ambivalent and at times conflicted relations between established collective narratives and the emerging academic historiography of the Terror.

### **Derg narratives of the Terror**

The Derg was quick to publicise its interpretations of the Terror, generating narratives that scarcely evolved until the regime was overthrown in 1991. By the time the urban Terror ebbed off in late 1978, the government-controlled 'Ethiopian Revolution

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9. Pierre Nora. 'Between memory and history: les lieux des mémoire', in *Representations*, no.26 (1989), 7-24.

Information Center' had published a series of texts documenting the progress of the military-led revolution.<sup>10</sup> All were replete with accounts of the Terror.

A prominent feature of Derg narratives was the exoneration of regime-led collective violence with reference to official revolutionary ideology. "The forces of counter-revolution", it was argued, had been "closely united and struggling to subvert the revolution."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, "a sustained political, ideological and military struggle" was required in order to protect the progress of the revolution, to guard the integrity of Ethiopia and to secure the national good.<sup>12</sup> Collective violence was thus represented as a necessary response to the challenges faced by the revolution. Foremost among these was the 'White Terror' mounted by the EPRP, but the lack of differentiation between opposing groups amplified the regime's claim of legitimate response. In such an atrocity environment, the Terror constituted a revolutionary duty with a recognised and readily invoked historical pedigree.<sup>13</sup>

As Leigh Payne has astutely observed in another context, "perpetrators often block memories. They learn a language that justifies and explains violence," and individually as well as collectively employ it to "erase from memory acts or emotions that contradict that story."<sup>14</sup> Ethiopia's newly adapted revolutionary lexicon provided the Derg with such violence-explaining language.<sup>15</sup> It was used principally to delegitimise regime

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10. See especially ERIC, *Ethiopia in Revolution* (July 1977); ERIC, *Tasks, Achievements, Problems and Prospects of the Ethiopian Revolution* (September 1977); ERIC, *The Men-in-Uniform in the Ethiopian Revolution* (September 1978).

11. POMOA, *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Revolution* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1977), 9.

12. ERIC, *The Men-in-Uniform*, 15.

13. ERIC, *Tasks, Achievements, Problems and Prospects*, introduction.

14. Leigh Payne, 'Confessional performances: perpetrators' testimonies to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in Whitehead, *Violence*, 256.

15. Tubiana, *La Révolution Éthiopienne*, 105-119.

opponents, another constant feature of Derg narratives about the Terror. Two strategies of delegitimisation were particularly common. The first strategy saw those who resisted military rule associated with the *ancien régime* or otherwise cast as class enemies of the revolution. The EPRP was thus dismissively characterised as "a political organization of the right wing section of the Ethiopian petty-bourgeois class as well as children of the overthrown class."<sup>16</sup> The party may have "tried to wear a Marxist-Leninist garb", but it was argued that its constituency remained "basically feudo-bourgeois and petty-bourgeois".<sup>17</sup> The Ethiopian Ambassador in London similarly suggested that "very few [EPRP members] were Marxists. Most were monarchists and supporters of the old regime."<sup>18</sup> While such class analyses were empirically ungrounded, they were required by the accepted orthodoxies of Marxist revolutionary discourse and advanced by all parties involved in the Terror.

More ambiguous were the relations between the Derg's narratives and the regime's former ally, Meison. On the one hand, Derg accounts of the urban violence heavily relied on the language and conceptual frameworks introduced by Meison during its 'critical support' for the military regime.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Meison figures like Fikre Merid who had died in EPRP attacks while collaborating with the regime were hailed in government publications as revolutionary "comrades" even after the split had occurred.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Derg texts were concerned to delegitimise the organisation: Meison is portrayed as a "rightist opportunist" that "deserted the

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16. ERIC, *Ethiopia in Revolution*, 45.

17. ERIC, *Tasks, Achievements, Problems and Prospects*, 15-6.

18. FCO 58/1417, Memo on UNHRC meeting, 26 April 1978.

19. The continuity in language and argument between the Meison-drafted 'Programme of the National Democratic Revolution' and later regime publications highlight this reliance.

20. ERIC, *Tasks, Achievements, Problems and Prospects*, 15.

revolution at a very critical moment".<sup>21</sup> The military regime consistently argued that anyone who failed to support the regime's line had placed themselves outside "the revolutionary camp" and failed to "side with the people."<sup>22</sup> As a result, these dissidents had relinquished their citizenship rights and made themselves legitimate and even necessary targets of 'revolutionary measures'.

The military regime's second strategy of delegitimisation consisted in the systematic pathologising of dissent. This becomes most evident in discussions of former opposition activists, who had begun to collaborate with the regime during the final stages of the Terror. By "smashing the white terror" of the EPRP, it was argued, government soldiers have "been able to free Ethiopia's youth who were victimized by the EPRP and have enabled it to join the camp of the revolution."<sup>23</sup> This argument is noteworthy not only for its creative portrayal of coercion and implicit concession of the EPRP's vast popularity, but especially for its conceptualisation of dissent. Opposition to military rule, on this reading, was less a political choice than a socio-psychological pathology. The supposed victims' agency is curiously absent from the narrative until it is returned through the violent actions of regime soldiers. In the Derg's discourse, agency and will, and hence personhood and citizenship, were contingent on political consent.<sup>24</sup>

The Derg's accounts of the Terror not only sought to justify regime actions and to delegitimise opponents, they also hailed the period's violence as a completed stage on the necessary trajectory of revolutionary progress. Such celebrations of violence

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21. ERIC, *The Men-in-Uniform*, 18.

22. ERIC, *PMAC Chairman and the World Press* (ERIC: Addis Ababa, 1978).

23. ERIC, *The Men-in-Uniform*, 15.

24. Mengistu Haile Mariam himself made the same argument to international journalists: ERIC, *PMAC Chairman and the World Press*.

constitute a third defining feature of the regime's narratives. The Terror became a founding motif of socialist Ethiopia, portrayed as an integral aspect of the revolution. Responding to criticisms of its human rights record by Amnesty International, the Derg proclaimed:

"If they say we do not have to kill people, are they not saying we have to quit the revolution? The cry to stop the killing is a bourgeois cry."<sup>25</sup>

Regime-led collective violence was thus sanctified by its revolutionary nature and ends. It became a conceptual foundation on which the new social order was to be built.<sup>26</sup>

Derg narratives of the Terror failed to win many hearts and minds. Few ordinary Ethiopians reproduced these interpretations with conviction rather than out of a sense of duty. Marta Gebre Tsadik's 1983 observation is only marginally hyperbolic: "everyone was in favour of revolution, but nobody is in favour of *this* revolution".<sup>27</sup> These were narratives aimed at reinforcing the allegiances of domestic and international supporters; they were not designed to convince those asking questions about the Derg's human rights record. While domestically disseminated by government media and Derg officials, these official interpretations of the Terror were reproduced internationally by socialist allies. Most notably, they were regularly replicated by *Pravda*,<sup>28</sup> while Raúl Valdés Vivó produced a Cuban account of the Ethiopian revolution that similarly relied

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25. Dadimos Haile, *Accountability for Crimes of the Past and the Challenges of Criminal Prosecution: The Case of Ethiopia* (Leuven University Press: Leuven, 2010), 13.

26. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 32; cf. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 7.

27. Marta Gebre Tsadik and Sandra Aldrich, *Marta: A Refugee's Story* (SPCK Publishing: London, 1983), 7.

28. Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II*, 457.

largely on Derg representations.<sup>29</sup> Within academia, Derg narratives have been incongruously defended and reiterated by Peter Schwab,<sup>30</sup> but also found echoes in more influential texts on the Ethiopian revolution. Thus David and Marina Ottaway,<sup>31</sup> Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux,<sup>32</sup> and less conspicuously even René Lefort<sup>33</sup> have all reproduced central aspects of the military regime's interpretation of Terror in their early accounts.

Bereft of official mouthpieces and deprived of political will, the Derg's narratives of the Terror rarely found expression following the regime's overthrow. A last public rendition occurred at the Red Terror trials, discussed in detail later in this chapter. Here, versions of regime accounts combined with abdications of personal responsibility to form the core defence of indicted Derg officials.<sup>34</sup> Later iterations were rare. In 2001, Genet Ayele published her long interview with Mengistu Haile Mariam concerning his time in power.<sup>35</sup> Defensive and unrepentant, the text rehearses the entrenched Derg narratives of earlier decades. This remains true, despite a less fierce and accusatory tone, in the second volume of the interview,<sup>36</sup> as well as in Mengistu's own memoir,

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29. Valdés Vivó, *Ethiopia's Revolution*; cf. Donald Crummey, 'Review: The Ethiopian Revolution', in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol.15, no.2 (1981), 343-6.

30. Peter Schwab, 'Human Rights in Ethiopia', in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 14, no.1 (1976), 155-60; Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society*, see especially 68.

31. Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, see especially 100, 147.

32. Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, see especially 120-2, 132.

33. Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, see e.g. 219.

34. Firew Kebede Tiba, 'The Mengistu Genocide Trial', 523.

35. Genet Ayele, **የሌተናንት ኮሎኔል መንግሥቱ ሃይለ ማርያም ትዝታዎች**; note also an unlikely late repetition of Derg narratives in Workers World News in 1996, reprinted in Gedion Wolde Amanuel, *The Day of the Martyrs*, 88-93.

36. Genet Ayele Anbesse, **የኮሎኔል መንግሥቱ ትዝታ** ['The Memories of Colonel Mengistu'] vol. II (Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2010]).

which was published amid much controversy in 2011.<sup>37</sup> Echoes of the Derg's narrative can also be found in several recently published memoirs of former soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Here, however, temporal distance combined with the authors' lower positions within the Derg to produce more critical and reflective accounts.

More publicly, Derg officials' interpretations of the Terror became the focus of national attention and debate in late 2010, when twenty-three senior Derg figures were pardoned. For a brief few weeks Ethiopian media outlets hosted debates over Derg narratives of the Terror, discussing whether these had evolved to concede responsibility for wrongdoing.<sup>39</sup> Following the former Derg officials' release in 2011, this window of public engagement swiftly closed. Lacking in power, popularity or political will, Derg narratives have since scarcely played a role in ongoing discussions about the memorialisation of the Terror.

### **EPRP narratives of the Terror**

Former members and sympathisers of the EPRP have invested considerable efforts into the organisation of shared memories and into the development of collective narratives concerning the Terror. As a result a distinct interpretative community has emerged, defined by a common set of perspectives, explanations and narrative patterns in its

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37. Mengistu Haile Mariam, *ትግላችን: የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ አብዮታዊ የትግል ታሪክ* ['Our Struggle: the history of the revolutionary struggle of the Ethiopian people'] (Tsehay Publishers: Los Angeles, 2004 E.C. [2011]).

38. See especially Zenebe Feleke, *ነበር* ['It happened']; Eshetu Wendemu Wolde Selassie, *ሕይወት በመንግስት ቱቤተ መንግስት* ['Life in the Palace of Mengistu'].

39. See especially Makonnen Endalkatchew, 'What price justice? What value life?', *Fortune Ethiopia*, 26 December 2010; Eskinder Nega, 'Ethiopia: forgiving Derg officials for Christmas', *Ethiomedias*, 1 January 2011; Firew Kebede Tiba, 'Derg guilty of genocide and politicide', *Ethiomedias*, 1 January 2011.

accounts of Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence. The popularity and currency of these EPRP-associated accounts means that their emphases, densities and omissions have found resonance in post-Derg memorialisation projects, such as the Red Terror trials and Addis Ababa's 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum'. However, the development and promulgation of these narratives has occurred less through such institutional sites of memory than through a number of defining texts and of shared social spaces.

The party histories of former Central Committee member Kiflu Tadesse arguably constitute the most prominent texts to have reflected and defined EPRP narratives.<sup>40</sup> Like earlier account of the Terror by another party leader, writing under the pseudonym of Babile Tola,<sup>41</sup> Kiflu Tadesse's widely-circulated volumes discuss experiences of the urban violence extensively. His analyses and interpretations have been copied by other writers.<sup>42</sup> They have also surfaced repeatedly in interviews with former EPRP members, particularly in the American diaspora.<sup>43</sup> Yet there has been no shortage of other accounts that narrate the history of the Terror from the perspective of EPRP members and sympathisers. These include some of the earliest academic studies of the Terror,<sup>44</sup> as

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40. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: the History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and The Generation Part II*.

41. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*.

42. Most closely in Taklo Teshome, የደም ዘመን ['The age of blood'] (Unknown: Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2011]).

43. See especially interviews with Solomon Kebede, 15 August 2012; Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012; Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012; Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012; Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

44. Nega Ayele and John Markakis, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*; Michael Chege, 'The revolution betrayed'.

well as a growing body of participant memoirs.<sup>45</sup> Highlighting some common features of these narratives, as well as areas of divergence and contestation between them, this section examines how memories of experiencing and of perpetrating violence during the Terror have been structured by what arguably remains the period's largest interpretative community.

At the heart of EPRP-associated accounts lie the twin concerns of exculpating the party's campaign of revolutionary urban violence and of demonstrating the illegitimate and unpopular nature of military rule. These two concerns have become increasingly connected in EPRP-associated texts: the party's urban assassination campaign is cast purely as a response to the tyranny and counter-revolutionary nature of the military regime. The contention is that "democracy was the central issue for the EPRP",<sup>46</sup> and that the party's own terror campaign was driven by a concern to secure political right and equity. During the Terror, collective violence had not only been portrayed as a legitimate and necessary revolutionary activity by party organs and most members, but was also widely celebrated. Following the divisive decision to adopt an urban guerrilla strategy in August 1976, the focus of enthusiasm for armed resistance was transferred from the party's rural base at Assimba to the cities of Ethiopia. Publications sympathetic to the EPRP celebrated the party's "revolutionary trial" of opponents.<sup>47</sup> Kiflu Tadesse recalls that violent action taken against "a notorious member of an Abyot Tebeka or any person that was allied with the Mengistu group became an inspiration and an occasion

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45. See especially Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*; Chanyalew Kassa, **ከደመላሽ የመቃብር አፋፍ** ['On the Edge of Demelash's Grave'] (Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]); Konjit Berhan, **ምርኮኛ** ['Captive'] (Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2010]); see also Tesfaye Mekonnen, **ዶድረስ ለባለታሪኩ** and Girmay Aberha, **የሚያነቡ እግሮች** ['Bleeding Feet'] (Addis Ababa, 2002 E.C. [2010]).

46. Interview, Kiflu Tadesse, 6 January 2012.

47. *Voice of the Militant Youth: Newsletter of the Ethiopian Students Union in Africa and the Middle East (ESUAME)* (November 1977) in Thomas L. Kane Collection, LoC.

to rejoice".<sup>48</sup> Such enthusiasm and revolutionary fervour, central to the EPRP's assassination campaign, fit uneasily into subsequent narratives of a purely reactive and victimised party, and are hence rarely discussed. Since the party has frequently been held responsible for the escalation of urban revolutionary violence,<sup>49</sup> narratives by former members and sympathisers have instead emphasised the need for self-defence in light of the Derg's state violence.

Like its opponents, the EPRP employed class analysis to assess Ethiopia's revolutionary situation and to distinguish supporters from opponents. It maintained that workers and peasants consistently sympathised with the party and claimed the uniform support of "revolutionary intellectuals"; opponents, on the other hand, were said to try "to mislead the people with bourgeois ideology under the guise of working class ideology."<sup>50</sup> Class analysis provided the framework within which the prominent claims of a "stolen revolution", which continue to feature prominently in EPRP narratives, were developed. The suggestion here is that the Derg seized the revolution from the people, with whose goals and aspirations the EPRP was closely identified.<sup>51</sup> By expropriating the popular revolution, it is argued, the military showed itself to be a counter-revolutionary force,<sup>52</sup> which was impeding Ethiopia's progress following its "usurpation of power".<sup>53</sup>

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48. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 286.

49. See for example Assafa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for Change*, 39; Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian revolution', 46, 52.

50. ግጭት ['Rebel!', Mouthpiece of the EPRA], Vol.2, No.2, (20 Tikimt 1970 E.C. [30 October 1977])in Thomas L. Kane Collection, LoC.

51. See for example Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 139-40; Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 24.

52. *Democrasia*, vol.3, no.1, Yekatit 26 1969 E.C. [5 March 1977].

53. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 54.

The argument that the Derg hijacked the popular revolution forms the core of the EPRP's denunciations of military rule as illegitimate and unpopular. Such denunciations, along with perceptions that the party itself acted with the legitimacy of a popularly appointed political body, are evident in the language employed by many EPRP-associated narratives. As Toggia observed, the EPRP functioned much like what Gramsci termed an "embryonic state structure".<sup>54</sup> This self-understanding remains reflected in EPRP-associated narratives. Kiflu Tadesse, for instance, writes that the party's Inter-Zonal Committee "confiscated" duplicating machines from a government office;<sup>55</sup> that needed money was "drafted from different banks in Addis Ababa";<sup>56</sup> and that arms were "confiscated" from the police force.<sup>57</sup> Konjit Teklu similarly recalls that her comrades "liberated" more than a million birr from a bank in Mercato.<sup>58</sup> The same claims to legitimate action appear in the language used to describe internal disputes: thus Getahun Sisay was "placed under arrest",<sup>59</sup> Solomon Tekle was "charged" and "sentenced",<sup>60</sup> and dissenters Berhane Meskel and Getatchew Maru were likewise to be "arrested".<sup>61</sup> Such use of language at once illustrates and supports claims of the party's popular legitimacy at the expense of the military regime.

Closely tied to the dual concern of defending EPRP actions while denouncing the government and its violence are peculiar patterns of chronology, which are unique to

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54. Pietro Toggia. 'The revolutionary endgame of political power: the genealogy of 'Red Terror' in Ethiopia', in *African Identities*, vol.10, no.3 (2012), 272.

55. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 36.

56. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 78.

57. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 316.

58. Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 17.

59. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 41.

60. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 319-20.

61. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 41, 182.

EPRP-associated narratives. Defining events of the Terror are consistently represented in a manner that casts EPRP violence as merely reactive and defensive. While otherwise meticulous in his scholarly attention, Solomon Getahun provides a telling example of chronology in the service of an EPRP-friendly narrative: he mentions the party's urban assassination campaign only after a discussion of the regime's search campaigns, of the 1977 May Day massacres and of the proclamation of Red Terror.<sup>62</sup> All of these events followed the EPRP's urban assassination campaign chronologically, and to an extent causatively. By reordering their chronology, the EPRP's killings are rendered mere responses to regime brutality.<sup>63</sup> Similar anachronisms with a political edge emerged in interviews with former party members. One informant tellingly located the date of the EPRP Urban Defense Squads' formation in the aftermath of the 1977 May Day massacres.<sup>64</sup> Such seven months anachronism supports perceptions of a purely reactive EPRP. Not unlike the use of legitimising language, chronological patterns have been inscribed into EPRP-associated narratives in ways that seek to justify the party's violence and to denounce the military regime and its civilian allies.

The complete identification of 'Red Terror' with regime violence in these narratives - ignoring the EPRP's own claim of the label at the time<sup>65</sup> - is entirely consistent with such memories of a popular and legitimate, but ultimately defensive and victimised party. The Red Terror is defined as "a campaign directed [...] against the EPRP and its sympathizers";<sup>66</sup> the regime and its allies are held uniquely responsible for the Terror,

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62. Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*, 52.

63. The earliest example of this justificatory chronological pattern appears to be found in Chege, 'The Revolution Betrayed' (1979), 372.

64. Interview, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012.

65. Interviews, Shiferaw Bekele, 9 September 2011 and Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

66. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 301.

while the party's hierarchy and membership are exculpated. In discussing state terror, EPRP-associated narratives face a significant challenge: how to account for the remarkable success of government violence in eradicating the party, while maintaining a fundamental disassociation between the military regime and the popular will. The challenge is addressed by reducing support for the regime to a small number of influential collaborators.<sup>67</sup> Concomitantly, the role of international actors in bolstering the Derg and defeating the urban opposition is highlighted.<sup>68</sup>

At this point it needs to be emphasised that the narratives examined thus far have been those associated with only one side of the divided party, following the split that occurred in 1976 over the commencement of urban armed resistance. It was only with the 2012 publication of Hiwot Teferra's autobiographical account of the revolution, *Tower in the Sky*, that a perspective from the other side of the party's schism received widespread public attention.<sup>69</sup> *Tower in the Sky* seeks to revise a number of common tenets of previous EPRP-associated narratives. Thus Getatchew Maru's Abyot group is presented as the major partner in the consolidation of the EPRP, rather than a late and ambiguous addition.<sup>70</sup> The chronological patterns that distinguish other EPRP-associated accounts are similarly missing: since Hiwot Teferra does not seek to justify the party's urban violence, which the party's "rectification movement" rejected, the framework constructed for the legitimation of such violence in other works is absent. Most significantly, *Tower in the Sky* introduces an alternative viewpoint onto the split

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67. Cf. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 269-70; Interview, Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

68. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012; curiously, the same emphasis on external support as the cause of the Derg's ascendancy is found in some Meison accounts: see Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 87.

69. Berhane Meskel's 1978 summary of his position failed to circulate widely. See ERTDRC 0015480, ስ ለ ብዙ ሃገን ምስክር። ['On the Majority Line'], 22 October 1978.

70. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa, 2012), 143.

within the EPRP itself. Hitherto, this had been a chapter of revolutionary history that had received little attention. Where EPRP-associated narratives did discuss the internal division, the group around Berhane Meskel and Getatchew Maru was pejoratively cast as *Anja* - the 'faction' - and blamed for the dismantling of the party's structure and for allegedly collaborating with the military regime.<sup>71</sup> Hiwot Teferra's memoir challenges these interpretations by providing a supplementary perspective.

Such fresh perspective can be seen as part of a wider diversification of EPRP-associated narratives. The extent to which former sympathisers continue to identify with and to reproduce established narrative structures varies considerably. Displaying an unwitting affinity with the concerns of the "rectification movement", several informants questioned the wisdom and justice of the party's urban violence in particular.<sup>72</sup> Despite some internal critical voices, however, a distinctive pattern of narratives associated with former EPRP sympathisers remains distinguishable in the emphases and densities, and in the vocabulary and chronology structuring memories.

### **Meison narratives of the Terror**

Much like their EPRP counterparts, former members and supporters of Meison have scripted narrative structures that are commonly shared and reproduced.<sup>73</sup> These

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71. Interviews, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012 and Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012. It ought to be noted that there is a fair summary of Berhane Meskel's arguments in Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 327. However, this has little effect on his wider analysis of the party's internal split: cf. 180-2, 269-70, 313-6, 325.

72. Interviews, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012; Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012 and Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012.

73. Fewer in number, those who retain a stake in Meison's history exhibit more cohesion in their written and oral narratives. The single most influential published expression of these narratives is Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ.

structures revolve around two concerns: on the one hand, the social and political achievements of the early revolutionary period are highlighted, vindicating the policy of 'critical support' for the military regime. Abera Yemane Ab, for example, has argued at great length that the first three years of the revolution "were years of genuine struggle and revolutionary transformation, notwithstanding the distortions by the EPRP propaganda machine".<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the involvement and responsibilities of Meison in Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence are systematically downplayed. The organisation is cast primarily as a victim of the Derg's Red Terror. Its involvement in earlier state violence is understated. In this second concern, Meison-associated narratives mirror their EPRP equivalents. The resultant arguments, however, differ substantially.

Integral to Meison-associated narratives is an often repeated chronological observation: that the Derg did not issue its official proclamation of Red Terror until the end of 1977, when Meison had already gone underground and found itself in opposition to the military regime. This common observation allows for a radical disassociation of Meison from the Red Terror, since the organisation was no longer in government when the latter erupted and Meison itself became one of its prime targets.<sup>75</sup> Kassahun Berhanu concedes that "Meison was not against the so-called Red Terror" as a concept, since the notion was inherent in the common denunciation of EPRP violence as 'White Terror'. Alongside other prominent Meison members, however, he also emphasises that the organisation itself never applied the concept to its actions.<sup>76</sup> Meison, it is frequently

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74. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 87.

75. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 26; Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2011.

76. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012; cf. Interviews, Negede Gobeze and Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

stressed by sympathisers, "did not participate in the Red Terror".<sup>77</sup> These chronological and conceptual emphases dissociate Meison from the Ethiopia's revolutionary violence. Accounts that represent Meison as an architect of the Terror, such as Bereket Habte Selassie's suggestion that the organisation "masterminded the eventual liquidation of the EPRP",<sup>78</sup> are thus rejected as anachronistic. When such "liquidation" occurred, Meison was on its receiving end rather than its perpetrator.

How periods of violence are designated and categorised of course conveys different moral and historical judgments.<sup>79</sup> This narrative pattern is no exception. Through its chronological emphases, it proposes an alternative reading not only of Meison's own actions, but also of the Terror's wider dynamics of violence. Revolutionary violence that occurred before Meison suspended its 'critical support' for the Derg is widely downplayed in these narratives. In interviews, one senior Meison leader suggested that the victims of the 1977 May Day massacres may have been as few as 300 - less than half the official figure.<sup>80</sup> Another doubted accounts of parents having to pay for the bullets that killed their children in May 1977.<sup>81</sup> As a third senior figure in the organisation argued, "no organised state terror was conducted until October 1977".<sup>82</sup> State violence that occurred whilst Meison was in government is hence either depicted as insubstantial, or reduced to the autonomous decisions of local actors.

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77. Interview, Getu Mekonnen, 13 April 2010. The only exception seems to be Alemu Abebe, who defended Meison's involvement in the Terror as late as 1992: Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 27.

78. Bereket Habte Selassie, 'The Dergue's dilemma', 17.

79. Robben, 'The assault on basic trust', 70.

80. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

81. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2011.

82. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

The narrative structure thus maintains the two-stage view of revolutionary progression that had motivated Meison's alliance with the Derg. Originally, this progression had been conceptualised as a 'long journey' to socialism, in contrast to the EPRP's 'short journey' of demanding a Popular People's Government. It anticipated a first stage of gradual reforms, mobilisation and politicisation, through which the 'broad masses' would be prepared to assume the leadership of the revolution. This was envisioned as the second stage, and the goal, of the revolution.<sup>83</sup> In subsequent Meison-associated narratives about the period this structure is maintained, but the second stage is transformed: instead of looking forward to the glories of socialist democracy, the narrative now looks back onto the doom of terror and repression. The long journey, as the title of Andargachew's chronicle suggests, was cut short.<sup>84</sup> This narrative structure demands a defense of Meison's role in government, and a more positive reading of Ethiopia's development before August 1977 than most analysts have proposed. These years, it is argued, were not a prefiguring of the later state terror, as argued in EPRP-associated narratives,<sup>85</sup> but rather "the most glorious years of the Ethiopian revolution."<sup>86</sup> Meison's significant role in the emergence of the *Netsa Ermeja* is readily acknowledged.<sup>87</sup> However, the concept is portrayed as a call for revolutionary investigations "independent of [...] corrupt bureaucracy and police establishment", rather than the often assumed "license to kill".<sup>88</sup> The violence generated by the

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83. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ, 220f.

84. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ ['A long journey cut short']; cf. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 97.

85. Babile Tola, *To Kill a Generation*, 69.

86. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian revolution', 87.

87. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 26.

88. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

implementation of *Netsa Ermeja* is either explained as the abuse of power-devolving structure by local agents,<sup>89</sup> or alternatively understated.<sup>90</sup>

Overall, Meison is represented as a "restraining hand" on Derg rule,<sup>91</sup> rather than as an organisation facilitating the regime's violence before August 1977 through the development of ideological justifications and through grassroots organisation. To illustrate this claim, Negede Gobeze emphasises that Meison leaders within POMOA opposed the open condemnation of the EPRP in September 1976.<sup>92</sup> The contention is that state violence before the Red Terror was minimal, and that Meison generally opposed it. In contrast, EPRP violence during this period is narrated eagerly and in detail. Meison members were the primary targets of EPRP assassinations, and in written accounts as much as in oral interviews experiences of living with this constant threat are highlighted.<sup>93</sup> Internal divisions within the EPRP are likewise readily recalled, usually with great sympathy for the position of Berhane Meskel.<sup>94</sup> Such emphasis on the violence of others serves at once to deflect from and to explain Meison's own role in Ethiopia's revolutionary bloodshed.

When the Derg officially endorsed a campaign of Red Terror in late 1977, Meison was among the declared targets of the campaign. Its members were systematically arrested and tortured; leaders such as Haile Fida, Desta Tadesse and Nigist Adane were

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89. Interview, Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012.

90. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 26 September 2011.

91. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

92. Interview, Negede Gobeze, 13 December 2012.

93. Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጩ ረጅም ጉዞ, 311f.; Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 19, 24; Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

94. Interviews, Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012 and Kebere Assefa, 24 August 2012.

eventually executed in prison.<sup>95</sup> In Meison-associated narratives, these experiences of victimhood constitute the primary register for remembering this second stage of Ethiopia's revolution: the Terror that took the place of the anticipated socialist fulfilment. These experiences represent a negative foil to the earlier successful steps along the clearly charted but ultimately aborted 'long road' towards scientific socialism. Meison's "restraining hand" on the military regime was removed, and the organisation itself suffered the resultant fury.<sup>96</sup>

These defining narrative structures are widely reproduced among former Meison members - the result, arguably, of a compact and cohesive interpretative community defined by shared experiences. Nevertheless, internal critical engagement with past participation in revolutionary violence and with aspects of this narrative structure has occurred. Informants acknowledged, for instance, that while Meison's primary vision consisted of re-education rather than liquidation, there was no sympathy for lengthy "bourgeois" legal processes. The common argument at the time was that "anything which slows down the progress of the revolution must be thrown aside."<sup>97</sup> This resulted in a lack of long-term solutions. It also generated a willingness to let the end justify the means to an extent that some informants confessed to be regretting.<sup>98</sup>

The perspectives advanced in Meison-associated narrative structures have very much become a minority sport. In part at least, this is the result of the very different set

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95. Wudu Tafete, 'Meison', 31-3; Amnesty International, AI 24/05/80, 22 April 1980.

96. Interview, Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012; Andargachew Assegid, በአዋር የተቀጠሉ ረጅም ጉዞ, 425f.

97. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

98. Interviews, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011; Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012; Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012.

of narratives advanced in EPRDF-backed memorialisation projects. It is these projects that we shall now turn to.

### **The Red Terror trials**

Assuming leadership of a fragile state in 1991, the EPRDF sought much-needed legitimacy and stability by casting itself as the opposite of its predecessor: if Derg rule had been marked by state terror, dictatorship and a disastrous economic record, the EPRDF was to stand for human rights, federal democracy and development. The first step in marking the contrast was to be the treatment of the ousted regime itself. The Derg had executed leading representatives of the *ancien régime* after assuming power in 1974. The EPRDF, in contrast, made a statement of intent by granting Derg officials the judicial trials and hearings which they themselves had denied their victims. In 1992, a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) was established to bring charges against the former incumbents in designated Red Terror trials.<sup>99</sup>

The SPO was charged with a dual mandate: primary was the pursuit of retribution for the human rights abuses committed by the Derg and its collaborators. But justice for victims and perpetrators was not the only concern. A second mandate consisted in the "historical obligation to record for posterity the brutal offences [...] perpetrated against the people of Ethiopia."<sup>100</sup> A detailed record of the Derg's state violence was to be

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99. The 'Special Public Prosecutor's Office Establishment Proclamation No.22/1992' is accessible online at <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/Ethiopia-Charter.pdf>. [accessed July 2014]; ነጋሪት ገጽጣ [Negarit Gazeta] No.18 (1992): 'Special Public Prosecutor's Office Establishment Proclamation No.22/1992'; Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 689-92.

100. 'Special Public Prosecutor's Office Establishment Proclamation No.22/1992'.

compiled, officially in order to prevent a future repetition of such abuses. The objective was the generation of a societal consensus on the Derg period and its state violence. The Red Terror trials were designed to establish a common and uniform interpretation of the Derg era, to be achieved by fixing and institutionalising its memory.<sup>101</sup> For the EPRDF, the process of course served a further purpose: the political leverage gained by organising the trials formed a central pillar of the new incumbents' legitimising discourse for years to come.<sup>102</sup> The trials were instituted to make a statement about the new regime as much as to produce a verdict on the old one.

The Red Terror trials generated a distinct narrative about Ethiopia's years of revolutionary violence. While the trials "exposed the meticulous and systematic planning of the [Terror's] killings", they did not dwell on everyday experiences and dynamics of violence.<sup>103</sup> Their format necessarily limited the extent to which the second mandate could be pursued. The shape of the narrative that was to emerge from the trials was already indicated in the SPO's mandate, which decreed a limited focus on violence perpetrated by the military regime and its collaborators. It was developed further in the designation of layers of responsibility, in the selection of evidence and in the framing of the indictments by the SPO. Apart from the trials, this EPRDF-sponsored narrative has found expression in the SPO's publication of the indictments and judgments of the

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101. Kjetil Tronvoll, 'The quest for justice or the construction of political legitimacy? The political anatomy of the Red Terror Trials' in Tronvoll et al., *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials*, 84.

102. Tronvoll, 'The quest for justice', 85-7.

103. Alex de Waal and Rachel Ibreck, 'Alem Bekagn: The African Union's accidental Human Rights Memorial' in *African Affairs*, 112, 447 (2013), 203.

trials<sup>104</sup> as well as in an outline of decisive evidence gathered.<sup>105</sup> A brief outline of the troubled proceedings of the Red Terror trials is required if we are to understand the evolution, form and reach of the narrative thus produced and publicised.

In a 1993 press release, Special Prosecutor Girma Wakjira described his task as the largest prosecution of human rights abuses since the Nuremberg trials.<sup>106</sup> The numbers indicated that this was no extravagant exaggeration. By 1997, 5198 public and military defendants had been charged. Between them, they were accused of having killed 8752 persons, of having caused 2611 disappearances and of being guilty of torture in 1837 cases.<sup>107</sup> These figures reflect crimes that the SPO thought it could prove from the available written and oral evidence, rather than a proposed number of Derg victims.<sup>108</sup> In support of these charges, the SPO compiled a staggering 250.000 Derg documents - testimony to the regime's thorough record-keeping - as well as more than 2500 eye-witness reports.<sup>109</sup> The number of indictments and of materials already highlighted not only the scope of the unfolding trials, but also the many difficulties that were to beset them.

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104. Special Prosecutor's Office, **ልዩ አቃቤ ሕግ በእነ ኮ/ል መንግሥቱ ኃ/ማሪያም ላይ ያቀረበው ክስና የፌዴራል ከፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ** ['The Indictment brought by the SPO in the Mengistu trial and the Verdict Given By the Federal High Court'](SPO: Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]); Special Prosecutor's Office, **ክፍል ሁለት: የፌዴራል ከፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሳኔ** ['Part Two: The Verdict Given by the Federal High Court'] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2000 E.C. [2008]).

105. Special Prosecutor's Office. **ደም ያዘለ ዶሴ** ['A Dossier Carrying Blood'] (SPO: Addis Ababa, 2002 E.C. [2010]).

106. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 680.

107. Girmachew Alemu Aneme, 'Apology and trials: the case of the Red Terror trials in Ethiopia', in *African Human Rights Law Journal*, vol. 6 (2006), 76. By the same time, 1018 persons had been convicted for participating in the Red Terror: Firew Kebede, 'The Mengistu genocide trial', 514.

108. Interview, Special Prosecutor Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

109. Document Affinity Group. 'Report on the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation & Research Center (ERTDRC)' (Unpublished: 2009).

Of the 5198 defendants, only 2246 were charged whilst in detention. A significant majority of 2952, including Mengistu Haile Mariam himself, had to be tried in absentia. Defendants were classified into three categories: firstly "policy makers", such as ministers, senior commanders or heads of police and security forces. Secondly "field commanders", primarily leaders of investigation units or Kebeles. And finally "material offenders", usually ordinary citizens and members of *Abyot Tebeka* squads.<sup>110</sup> Controversially, the high profile trials against the first category of defendants were framed as cases of genocide and crimes against humanity. This was possible due to the exceptionally broad understanding of genocide in Ethiopia's 1957 penal code, which includes political groups as possible targets of genocide.<sup>111</sup> The result was that the attention of the public, the media and even the judges focused on the appropriateness of the genocide charges as much as on the specifics of the period's violence.<sup>112</sup> Conceptualisations of the Red Terror as genocide remain an important aspect of EPRDF narratives, legitimising the fact and means of the regime's rule in a manner not dissimilar to Rwanda's RPF.

Questions were soon raised about the extent to which due process was followed in the trials. The indictments were in many cases marked by extreme spatio-temporal vagueness. Defendants were accused of crimes committed "in Addis Ababa and throughout the country", or "in an unknown place and manner", on unspecified dates between 1974 and 1991. Such vagueness made an alibi defense impossible, while the

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110. Girmachew Alemu, 'Apology and trials', 76.

111. For a discussion of Ethiopia's genocide law, see Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 718; Firew Kebede, 'The Mengistu genocide trial', 519.

112. For academic analyses of the applicability of the category of genocide, see also Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide*, passim. Debates about genocide charges took on new meaning in 2005, when opposition politicians were charged with attempted genocide in overtly political trials of little credibility.

scarcely comprehensible form of the indictments further impeded the ability of defendants to respond to the charges.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, proceedings were impeded by capacity restrictions and limited available resources. The lack of qualified lawyers in the Public Defense Office meant that individual lawyers had to take on a large number of at times conflicting cases, such as superiors and those in their charge, each seeking to place responsibility for a certain crime on the other party.<sup>114</sup> Since senior judges had been laid off in 1991 for their association with the Derg regime, questions were also asked about the experience and independence of the bench.<sup>115</sup> These questions introduced an important theme in the history of the Red Terror trials: as the prosecutions came to be increasingly seen as politically motivated, public interest and support for the trials waned. The reach and influence of narratives about the Terror produced by the trials was accordingly limited.

Public disenchantment with the trials and concerns over due process were similarly provoked by the slow pace of proceedings.<sup>116</sup> The first defendants did not get to court for three years after being arrested, a serious stretch of acceptable terms of detention by any standard. The first high-profile defendant to be convicted, former Minister of Agriculture Dr. Geremew Debele, was sentenced in 1999 only to be immediately released, having already served his sentence of eight years in prison. The trials concluded in 2008, more than a decade after the attention of human rights groups had begun to shift from the human rights abuses of the Terror to the infringed rights of the

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113. Jacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 718.

114. Girmachew Alemu, 'Apology and trials', 79. One Judge, Debebe Haile Gabriel, resigned from the court due to the shortage of qualified Defense Lawyers and in a subsequent LLM at Makerere University stated that lower-level defendants in the trials lacked access to a meaningful defense: Firew Kebede, 'The Mengistu genocide trial', 527.

115. Jacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 718; Girmachew Alemu, 'Apology and trials', 78.

116. Jacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 741.

defendants.<sup>117</sup> As Alex de Waal has noted, "the EPRDF's commitment to ending impunity had faded," which resulted in the trials "becoming an embarrassment, [...] overshadowed by the EPRDF's own deteriorating record on human rights."<sup>118</sup> The delays and the regime's own record of abuses contributed to the trials' inability to generate a societal consensus on the Derg period and its years of Terror. Instead, the narrative developed by the trials remained but one of several competing perspectives on the Terror. It was subject to the same logic of selective political bias, and beset by the same difficulties of limited reach and frequent contestation as alternative narratives.

The goal of the Red Terror trials had been to bring Derg perpetrators to justice, and thereby to embody the EPRDF's commitment to human rights and justice. Truth commissions and amnesties, which became celebrated paradigms in international discussions about transitional justice as the Ethiopian trials unfolded,<sup>119</sup> were foreign to the EPRDF's approach. The contrast with the acclaimed contemporary African cases of Rwanda and South Africa is conspicuous and revealing. The Ethiopian trials sought retribution. The pursuit of truth constituted merely a secondary mandate, while reconciliation was never on the agenda. The reasons for such an approach are plain: while there had been numerous truth commissions around the world by the time the Red Terror trials were established,<sup>120</sup> there was little incentive for the EPRDF to follow their

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117. See for example Amnesty International, 'Ethiopia: "Red Terror" detainees finally charged', AI Index AFR 25/01/97, 23 January 1997; cf. Frode Elgesem and Girmachew Alemu Aneme, 'The rights of the accused: a human rights appraisal' in Tronvoll et al., *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials*, 84.

118. de Waal, 'A permanent human rights memorial', 158-9.

119. Alex Boraine, 'Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: the third way' in Robert Rothberg and Dennis Thompson (eds.), *Truth v Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2000), 143.

120. Priscilla Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity - How Truth Commissions Around the World are Challenging the Past and Shaping the Future* (Routledge: New York, 2001), 17-22.

lead. Having comprehensively defeated and dismantled an already unpopular Derg regime, there was scarce reason to fear that criminal prosecutions would result in unrest or in "justice with ashes".<sup>121</sup> In contrast to Argentina or Chile, there was no threat of a military backlash;<sup>122</sup> in contrast to Rwanda and South Africa, there was no pressing need to shape a new society in which perpetrators could integrate alongside their former victims.<sup>123</sup> There is no doubt, however, that these other African cases upstaged the Red Terror trials.<sup>124</sup> In their shadow, the EPRDF-sponsored trials increasingly looked like victors' justice, with the law being used merely as a political instrument.

The EPRDF's lack of interest in reconciliation received further confirmation in 2003, when 33 Derg officials wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi requesting a platform from which to issue a public apology. Their request was interpreted either as an appeal for clemency, or as proposing an alternative avenue to the trials for dealing with the Derg's past. Presumably on such an interpretation, no platform was granted at the time. In 2006 the legal scholar Girmachew Alemu, who has widely commented on the trials, argued for the need of an apology as a complementary, rather than as a substitutive, element of a national healing process.<sup>125</sup>

But there was to be no smooth process of justice, repentance and national healing. Public faith in the EPRDF's administration of transitional justice faltered, while the

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121. Kader and Louise Asmal, Ronald S. Roberts (eds.), *Reconciliation Through Truth: A Reckoning of Apartheid's Criminal Governance* (David Philip: Cape Town, 1997), 18.

122. Mark Ensalaco, *Chile under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2000), 257; Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 316.

123. Aneta Wierzynski. 'Consolidating democracy through transitional justice: Rwanda's Gacaca Courts', in *New York University Law Review*, No. 79 (2004), 1935; Dumisa Tsebeza, 'The uses of Truth Commissions: lessons for the world' in Robert Rothberg and Dennis Thompson (eds.), *Truth v Justice*, 165.

124. Yacob Haile Mariam, 'The quest for justice', 676.

125. Girmachew Alemu, 'Apology and trials', 81f.

regime lacked the political will to broaden its dealings with the Derg's past. As the trials were widely identified with the EPRDF, and the latter's moral authority to prosecute Red Terror perpetrators was increasingly objected to in light of its own human rights record,<sup>126</sup> the trials' influence on the Ethiopian public's memories of the Terror dwindled. This was true particularly after the political violence, the detention of opposition leaders and the eventual pardons that followed the 2005 elections. The convicts and defendants of the Red Terror trials now came to be seen as political prisoners by a wide spectrum of the population, paralleling the leaders of the political opposition in 2005. This effected a further politicisation of the trials, and a blurring of the distinction between executive and judiciary.<sup>127</sup> For the EPRDF, there remained little leverage in human rights discourses, which hence became firmly subordinated to the official ideology of developmentalism. As a result, the Red Terror trials lost their *raison d'être*, ending quietly in 2008.

At the end of 2010, the trials and their convictions briefly returned to the centre of public discussions once more. Religious leaders issued a joint call for imprisoned Derg officials to be pardoned. The call was vehemently opposed by victim associations, and the appeal to the executive in any case stood on dubious constitutional foundations.<sup>128</sup> An official pardon was initially rejected. However, debates surrounding the joint call indicated a widespread public acceptance of a pardon, paving the way for the eventual release of 16 senior Derg officials from Kaliti jail in late 2011.<sup>129</sup> The end of EPRDF

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126. Firew Kebede, 'The Mengistu genocide trial', 528.

127. Tronvoll, 'The quest for justice', 87-8.

128. Tesfaye Habiso, 'Current talk for release of Derg officials: a practicable advocacy or and ambitious move?', *The Reporter*, 1 January 2011.

129. The release was made constitutional by a presidential conversion of death sentences to life imprisonment, which can be shortened to 20 years on the basis of good conduct. See Interview, Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012.

interest in the trials and their convictions generated the political will that facilitated the releases. For the EPRDF, the trials and their memory had become a political instrument that had been blunted and gotten out of hand. They belonged to an earlier period of the regime's evolution, before developmentalism had become its paramount pillar of legitimacy. Having failed to establish a national consensus on the Derg years, the trials had attracted accusations of human rights violations and legal farce instead.

This assessment had two important consequences for historians and for EPRDF-sponsored narratives concerning the Terror. Firstly, it led to a reversal of commitments to release the SPO's archives.<sup>130</sup> The trials had ceased to serve as symbols for the regime's dedication to human rights, reducing the political will to fulfil their second, 'historical' mandate. Furthermore, the diversity and narrative autonomy of the evidences collated by the SPO had the potential of further upsetting and destabilising the EPRDF's metanarrative.<sup>131</sup> The release of records about the Red Terror could not only have failed to support, but might even have undermined the EPRDF's consensus-dependent developmentalist project. The second consequence was regime-support for a site of memory concerning the Red Terror that would align with the regime's developmentalism less capriciously. This site of memory is the 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum'.

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130. On the regime's earlier commitment to open the archives, see Kissi, 'Remembering Ethiopia's Red Terror', 17f.

131. Possibilities for this to occur are countless. For example, the archives contain information on EPRP members who joined the EPRDF; they could be used to challenge simplistic narratives of liberation; and they could certainly be employed to challenge the EPRDF's own human rights record.

## **The 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum'**

Several societal sites of memory centred on the Terror have emerged since the early 1990s, most significantly associations of victims and of their relatives.<sup>132</sup> Yet these have tended to be publicly inconspicuous and inward-looking groups, which primarily provide venues for survivors to share their memories and to assist each other emotionally and financially. The 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum', by contrast, has received public and international attention since being inaugurated by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in March 2010.<sup>133</sup> Located centrally in Meskel Square, the Museum has become a prominent feature of Addis Ababa's cultural landscape. Its position, adjacent to the site of Mengistu Haile Mariam's infamous 1977 speech declaring the official pursuit of state terror, is symbolically suggestive. The place at the heart of the city once occupied by the Terror is now instead dedicated to a human rights memorial, which looks back to a past of collective violence and forward with a declaration of 'never again'.

Plans for the Museum began as a private initiative by the 'Ethiopian Martyrs' Families and Friends Association'. As senior EPRDF figures became stakeholders, however, this also became a government project. The shift is reflected in the adoption of a simple linear narrative, congruent with support for the EPRDF's rule and developmental project. Earlier plans had envisioned a more complex and multi-perspectival approach, which would document a range of different experiences and

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132. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

133. As of early 2014, the popular travel site TripAdvisor.com rates the Museum as Addis Ababa's top tourist attraction.

memories of the Terror.<sup>134</sup> These plans were shelved: the permanent exhibition depicts a fundamental binary between a violence-perpetrating Derg and a victimised civilian population. Not only subtle grey areas of collaboration, but even the EPRP's assassination campaign and Meison's dual experience of support for and victimisation by the regime are ignored. In this binary framework, the Museum is revealingly reminiscent of the earlier Red Terror trials.

The Museum's narrative arch moves from the exploitative imperial regime over the brutally repressive period of Derg rule to the 1991 liberation of Addis Ababa by the EPRDF.<sup>135</sup> It culminates with images and an explanation of the Red Terror trials, celebrated as the marks of a new era. The age of state-sponsored barbarism, it suggests, has ended. Details about the forms, practices and types of violence during the Terror are embedded within this broad narrative. Progress and liberty had finally been achieved in Ethiopia. In casting the EPRDF as Ethiopia's liberator from Red Terror, the Museum falls heir to the earlier Red Terror trials.<sup>136</sup> In presenting a narrative uncomplicated by the procedural difficulties and accusations of human rights infringements that marred the trials, it allows the regime to re-appropriate memories of the Terror as tools of political legitimacy. The Museum thus constitutes a final engagement with the memory of the Terror, a closing of the books that the trials had failed to achieve and an open, independent SPO archive might have threatened.

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134. Interview, Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011.

135. This power-legitimising narrative arch is ironically reminiscent of a museum exhibit organised by the Derg in 1984, which moved from pre-historic Lucy via Aksum, Lalibela and the battle of Adwa to the revolution and ultimately the founding of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia. The imperial era's penchant for power-sustaining meta-narratives has been sustained by its successor regimes. Cf. Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 14-5.

136. Tronvoll, 'The quest for justice', 85.

Continuity with the trials is also seen in the theme of genocide, taken up through allusions to global genocide museums. Piles of victims' shoes, discovered when mass graves were excavated in the early 1990s,<sup>137</sup> are filled into coffins, establishing a link to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum<sup>138</sup> and to Jerusalem's Yad Vashem. Rows of retrieved skulls are on prominent display, contravening Ethiopian burial cultures but drawing strong parallels to the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre. The lack of subtlety in these allusions may point to the limited budget and expertise that flowed into the exhibition, but it also suggests how this exhibition is meant to be received. In its design, exhibition and motto, the Memorial Museum aspires to take its place among the world's celebrated genocide museums. The Ethiopian Terror, by implication, is firmly placed among the twentieth century's most infamous cases of state-organised mass violence. The availability of English-language guides indicates that the Museum and its global references are at least in part aimed at the international community.

But noticeably more effort has been put into Amharic tags and explanations than into their English equivalents. The Museum's primary target audience is the Ethiopian public. Its declared objective is to educate the public about the abuses of the past in order to prevent its repetition. Yet a conspicuous lack of engagement with the Terror's social dynamics of violence impairs such a function, while the political message conveyed by the exhibition is far less ambiguous: it was the liberation by the EPRDF that vindicated the blood of the 'martyrs'. Allusions to global genocide memorials enhance the contrast: Ethiopia has endured her own holocaust, and it is only in

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137. Cf. Getatchew Mekasha, 'The Ethiopian holocaust', 12.

138. The influence of this larger 'Memorial Museum' is also evident in the arrangement of interior spaces, the depiction of victims' images and the guiding motto of "never again".

liberation from the Derg that the aspirations of a victimised generation have found their fulfilment.

The Museum's grand narrative stands in stark contrast to its meagre context. The building contains an incongruous library. While holding a small archival collection and some key texts on the history and memory of the Terror, this library is mostly filled with entirely unrelated books of the self-help type so popular in Addis Ababa's corner bookshops. The archival collection does contain a range of unique images. But these are neither filed nor contextualised with information concerning provenance, date or authorship. Such shortcomings are primarily symptoms of the Museum's financial difficulties, as it struggles to operate with insufficient funding - the same reason for which the Museum's auditorium temporarily served as a cinema showing popular local films, before being converted into a conference room by a Chinese engineering company. But such shortcomings also illustrate that the Museum's professional standards do not yet justify the global associations it is seeking.

Responses to the opening of the Museum, from the Ethiopian public as well as from international visitors, have overwhelmingly been positive. Informants who had survived the Terror spoke of their difficulties in visiting the exhibition, which "brought [back] very bad memories".<sup>139</sup> Some lamented the glaring omissions and the politicisation of memory,<sup>140</sup> but all expressed appreciation for such a permanent memorial to the Terror in the centre of the capital. In this sense, the Museum succeeds in serving as a site of memory that aids "victims' families and friends in overcoming their grief and seeking a

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139. Interview, Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012.

140. Interviews, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012; Yeraswork Admassie, 20 September 2011; Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012; more guardedly, this also included Gedion Wolde Amanuel, who was involved in the Museum's establishment: interview, 19 March 2012.

traditional mode of *erim mawtat* ['a closure']".<sup>141</sup> Concomitantly, however, the Museum's stark political edge undermines this function in the eyes of some victims: as one informant lamented, "whenever the Red Terror is mentioned [in public] it is all about politics. It is all about getting an advantage out of it."<sup>142</sup>

Such politicised narratives also stand in conflicted relation to academic histories of the Terror, which of necessity need to question, qualify and deconstruct instrumentalist narrative frameworks.<sup>143</sup> In the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum, the political motive behind the EPRDF's narratives of the Terror has frozen and displaced the historical mandate proposed as a necessary value by the regime in 1993. In its present form, the Museum offers a window onto the memorialisation of the Terror more than onto the period itself.

### **Dissenting voices**

This chapter has identified five major narrative structures framing memories of the Terror, expressed and embodied in textual or institutional *lieux de mémoire*. It has also shown that within each interpretative community and framework there have been dissenting voices, lone wolves that have sought to provide alternative perspectives. Some, like Hiwot Teferra in her widely discussed 2012 memoir,<sup>144</sup> have captured the

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141. Pietro Toggia, 'The revolutionary endgame', 276.

142. Interview, Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012.

143. Cf. Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history', passim.

144. Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*; see also Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*.

national imagination and augmented or reshaped particular narrative traditions. Others have barely made a dent on the narrative structures they have sought to challenge.<sup>145</sup>

In many cases memories of the Terror have been narrated from outside of these major frameworks, reflecting alternative forms of collective or individual remembering. Few of these works have sought to directly engage the political cleavages and interpretations that define the major frameworks.<sup>146</sup> More common in this category are personal memoirs, particularly those that are told as stories of survival and migration rather than of struggle and resistance.<sup>147</sup> Memoirs of expatriates equally neither belong to nor methodically engage with any of the narrative structures surveyed in this chapter.<sup>148</sup> Unlike these collectively produced narrative scripts, they are not defined by presentist political goals and do not seek to organise their memories with a view to constituting collective identities in the present. Such memoirs instead tend to broadly align with international narratives about Ethiopia that were produced and publicised in the aftermath of the 1984 famine, casting the country as a land of despair, violence and suffering.

Dissenting voices that have directly engaged with the prominent narratives about the Terror that are examined in this chapter have tended to come from two very disparate places: firstly, there have been subterranean debates that have circulated but never been published. By nature elusive, these are only dimly reflected in oral

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145. See for example Assafa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for Change*; Abera Yemane Ab, 'The Defeat of the Ethiopian revolution'.

146. For examples, see Bereket Habte Selassie, 'The Dergue's Dilemma'; Tubiana, *La Révolution Éthiopienne*.

147. See Marta Gebre Tsadik, *A Refugee's Story*; Felekech Metaferia, *Sparkle*; Taddele Seyoum, *Life History*.

148. Bascom, *An American Boyhood in Ethiopia*; Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror*; Katz, 'Children's revolution'; Cassiers and Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes*.

interviews and are better approached through ethnographic fieldwork than through the traditional methods of historical research. An example is provided by urban anthropologist Marco di Nunzio, who has shown how residents in Piassa's notorious *Serategna Sefer* ['Workers' Quarter'] have interpreted the participation of neighbourhood gangsters in the EPRP's 'urban defense squads' in light of longstanding local rivalries.<sup>149</sup> This highly localised reading undercuts the interpretations of the major narrative frameworks, which have variously represented this dynamic as evidence of the EPRP's anarchist features<sup>150</sup> or alternatively of the extent of revolutionary fervour and of popular opposition to military rule.<sup>151</sup> While regularly slipping through the historian's methodological net, such subterranean interpretations have consistently challenged the major narrative frameworks engaged in this chapter.

A second set of dissenting voices, more accessible but probably less popular, consists of academic writings about the Terror. This claim that these have been dissenting voices may need to be qualified: from the outset, some academic analyses of the period have consciously sought to uphold one of the emerging narrative structures,<sup>152</sup> while others have unwittingly reproduced these structures, either falling to the "discursive seduction" of particular narrative patterns<sup>153</sup> or falling captive to them through to their methodological and interpretative choices.<sup>154</sup> Yet numerous academic

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149. Marco di Nunzio, 'The Arada have been eaten', ch.2; the same local reading is echoed in the interviews with Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 March 2012 and Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

150. See for example *Addis Zemen*, 9 Teqemt 1970 E.C. [19 October 1977].

151. Interviews, Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012 and Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

152. Michael Chege, 'The Revolution Betrayed'; Nega Ayele and John Markakis, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia*; Peter Schwab, *Ethiopia: Politics, Economics and Society*.

153. Cf. Antonius Robben, 'The politics of truth and emotion', 89.

154. See for example Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*; Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*.

texts on the Terror, whether published closer to the events under review<sup>155</sup> or more recently,<sup>156</sup> have challenged the interpretations of dominant narrative frameworks or sought to harmonise them. Failing to align neatly with any one set of narratives, such historical approaches have been fiercely criticised by the latter's self-appointed guardians.<sup>157</sup> In challenging the certainties of the past, historical research inevitably poses a threat to political projects and shared identities built on their foundation in the present. Here as elsewhere,<sup>158</sup> memory and history find themselves in uneasy tension.

Yet such tension is not a foregone conclusion. Positioned on the interface between memory and history, the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center (ERTDRC) is an institution that is dedicated to the memory of the Terror and actively seeks to embrace and further historical research. While rooted in the experiences of its founder, who was tortured as an EPRP sympathiser, the Center has resisted close identification with any established interpretative framework.<sup>159</sup> Its founder's insistence to interrogate own patterns of memory through historical methods<sup>160</sup> is one that was echoed in interviews with other participants in the period.<sup>161</sup>

Tensions between established patterns of collective memory and emerging historical approaches are likely to persist. History can follow the entrenched narratives of

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155. See especially Brietzke, *Law, Development and the Ethiopian Revolution*; Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity*; Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*.

156. See especially Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror'; Messay Kebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts*; Pietro Toggia, 'The revolutionary endgame'.

157. See for example the scathing critique of Bahru Zewde's 'The history of the Red Terror' on the EPRP-associated Assimba blog: <http://assimbablog.assimba.org/2010/04/01/book-review-the-ethiopian-red-terror-trials/comment-page-1/> [Accessed 1 July 2014].

158. Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history', 9.

159. For a history of the ERTDRC, see Edward Kissi, 'Remembering Ethiopia's "Red Terror"'.  
160. Interview, Hirut Abebe, 16 June 2012.

161. Interviews, Ermias Wolde Amlak, Addis Ababa, 7 March 2012; Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012; Kassahun Berhanu, 24 August 2012

interpretative communities only as far as its own questioning and deconstructing methods allow. Yet historians need not limit themselves to the challenging and harmonising of competing interpretations of the Terror. As this chapter has set out, the patterns, densities and omissions of collective narrative structures are themselves revealing windows onto Ethiopia's revolutionary violence and its no less contested afterlife.

## Chapter 7 - Conclusions and Beginnings

### Rethinking the Ethiopian Terror

The focus of this thesis has been on the causes, dynamics and afterlife of Ethiopia's revolutionary Terror. The period's violence has proven transformative and hugely consequential, but has only received scant academic attention. Such neglect is the product of ongoing political sensitivities, and of the social repercussions that the violence had for many Ethiopians. As a consequence, the Ethiopian Terror has neither taken its place in the comparative historiography of African conflicts, nor been integrated with wider interdisciplinary studies of collective violence. It has been the goal of this study to establish the place of the Terror in Ethiopia's modern history, recognising its significance and impact. To do this, new sources have been sought in oral histories and from a range of international archives. These have been triangulated with materials familiar to scholars of the Ethiopian revolution to lay the foundations of this study. On their basis, the thesis has given an account of the Terror that describes and seeks to explain its violence, while also establishing the social and cultural context in which it occurred.

This concluding chapter surveys the study's main findings and arguments. It begins by reviewing contributions that have been made to our understanding of the causes and dynamics driving the Ethiopian Terror. Here, examination of the period's changing modes of violence has constituted a central focus of the study. The Terror's collective violence was an aggregate product, fashioned jointly by local and supralocal actors.

This study has begun to unveil the patterns of power and agency that constituted this synergy. Furthermore, it has brought out defining elements of the Terror: on the one hand, the role of experiences and exercises of violence in shaping conflict identities; and on the other hand, the making of the organisational structures and operational cultures that shaped perpetrators and their violence. A review of these interconnected findings forms the opening part of this concluding discussion.

Next, the consequential legacies of the Terror will be appraised. As this study has shown, the short years of revolutionary urban violence have deeply shaped Ethiopia's state and society, as well as relations between the two. These changes occurred as the Terror's collective violence was bureaucratised and inscribed into the structures and practices of state institutions, but it was equally the result of individual and societal responses to the period's violence. Memories of the Terror have been structured and instrumentalised to construct, defend or legitimise political projects and identities in the following decades. A discussion of the Terror's contested memorialisation process will conclude this survey of key findings.

In each of these areas, the study's contributions to three strands of scholarship are assessed: firstly, to modern Ethiopian history in general and to the expanding literature on revolutionary Ethiopia in particular. Secondly, to the wider historiography of conflict in Africa. And finally, to global comparative and interdisciplinary discussions about collective violence. Conclusions are often new beginnings, and the findings of this study are no exception. The sources, arguments and findings presented here have opened up new avenues for inquiry. In closing, this chapter surveys areas of research and application that this study has made possible and pointed towards.

## **Findings and contributions**

The findings and contributions presented in this study have depended on the triangulation of a disparate range of sources, some of which are inserted into the historiography of the Ethiopian Terror for the first time. These include international archival materials from East Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Critically, these new sources also encompass the oral testimonies of diverse participants in the period's violence. Their willingness to share often painful memories indicates that the critical distance necessary to publicly reminisce about Ethiopia's revolutionary violence has widely been attained. It has been the import of these new sources, interpreted in dialogue with earlier studies of the Ethiopian revolution on the one hand, and with broader interdisciplinary discussions about the dynamics of collective violence on the other, that has allowed for this study's close investigation of revolutionary urban violence and of its aftereffects. In the following, the findings of this investigation and their contributions to wider historiographical discussions are discussed under three rubrics: dynamics of collective violence in the Terror, legacies left by the Terror and memorialisation of the Terror.

### ***(i) Dynamics of collective violence in the Terror***

Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence is commonly understood and explained with reference to the period's defining political cleavages: the conflict between the military

regime and its civilian opponents, and the militarised antagonisms among the civilian left. To explain the violence of the Terror, in the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution, has been to trace the development of these cleavages. The history of revolutionary violence thus remains overwhelmingly a macro-political history. Even social histories of Ethiopia have adopted such a perspective to explain the urban violence.<sup>1</sup> And undoubtedly, there is much to commend this approach. As this study has shown, the 1974 revolution was followed by an unprecedented politicisation of urban society. For younger residents in particular, this wave of political consciousness and activism was channelled by and embodied in new local political structures, from Youth Leagues to the Kebeles. Indeed, we have seen that the defining political cleavages of the Terror have not only been invoked to organise and justify rival campaigns of violence at the time, but have also proven sufficiently powerful to shape distinct narrative patterns in subsequent decades.

However, it has also become clear in the preceding chapters that a narrow historiographical focus on the prominent divisions of the time needs to be qualified and broadened. Relations between political identities and organised violence in the Ethiopian Terror were not unidirectional. Violence was decidedly not a mere result of political cleavages. Rather, group behaviour and identities were themselves deeply shaped by experiences of collective violence. During the Terror, political identities acquired and solidified their meanings and positions, losing their earlier fluidity in response to experiences of violence. In this sense, the political cleavages of early revolutionary Ethiopia were the product as much as the catalysts of collective violence.

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1. See Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*. The notable exception is Abbink's perceptive essay calling for a greater engagement with the social and cultural meanings of the Terror's violence: see Abbink, 'The impact of violence'.

Endogenous conflict dynamics, in other words, played a decisive role in shaping political identities and campaigns of violence.<sup>2</sup>

The centrality of collective violence in generating conflict identities was particularly apparent when the urban conflict first escalated in late 1976. Both within the Derg and within the EPRP, the adoption of new campaigns of revolutionary violence was intensely contested during this period. Such campaigns were only adopted in response to a perceived atrocity environment, and they entailed internal divisions and the generation of new political identities and alliances. Experiences and expectations of violence thus shaped the defining political cleavages and identities of the period, thereby engendering the escalation of the Terror.

This study has also begun to explore the logical consequence of these observations, namely that the Ethiopian Terror's collective violence has been driven and shaped by local dynamics. In many cases, such local vectors of conflict did not neatly align with the Terror's presumed 'master cleavages'. Instead, the political identities and discourses provided by the regime and its civilian opponents constituted readily appropriated legitimising frameworks. They offered justifications and impunity for violent actions that were carried out in their name, even if not necessarily driven by their logic. Thus criminal gangs in Mercato and Arada, such as the 'China Group' or the 'Genghis Group', were co-opted into the EPRP and into Meison. There they were hailed as "wonderful revolutionaries",<sup>3</sup> but also made use of the narratives of their new affiliations to extend their earlier gang-conflicts. The relation between political identities and acts of violence was not unidirectional.

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2. The Ethiopian Terror thus supports Kalyvas's model of the perpetuation of violence in civil conflicts: cf. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 46-7.

3. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

Much the same logic was at work in the newly established Kebele structures, where militia leaders like Girma Kebede or Kelbessa Negew established localised reigns of terror. Such local actors were provided not only with instruments of violence, but also with discourses that gave grounds for their use and appropriation. In the absence of meaningful accountability structures, such leaders were able to carry out violent actions, often highly local in motivation, which "in peacetime would be punishable as crimes."<sup>4</sup> Due to the decentralisation of authority that characterised the Terror until late 1977, violence perpetrated at the local level thus cannot be uniformly explained with reference to the period's macro-political cleavages.

As this study has shown, the same dynamic of decentralisation, leading to more localised and less coordinated violence, also came to characterise the EPRP's assassination campaigns. Once the party's leadership was decimated and its organisational structures were dismantled, the selection of targets became increasingly autonomous and parochial in nature. The centralised political will of the party, and hence the often invoked macro-political cleavages, no longer determined the logic of violence.

These representative examples illustrate how Addis Ababa's discourses of violence were monopolised during the Terror. All manner of violent acts were conceptualised in the language of the political 'master cleavages', during the Terror itself as well as ex-post facto. A limited focus on such cleavages is hence necessarily reductive. In its place, this study has argued for the need to engage underlying local dynamics, as well as the impact of experiences and exercises of violence themselves, in order to understand Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence.

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4. Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence*, 12.

The emphasis on the Ethiopian Terror's endogenous conflict dynamics, and hence on contingent factors in the making of its violence, may require a brief explanatory excursus. Two unreconciled approaches to the analysis of conflict persist in the historiography of Eastern Africa, taking opposite views concerning the benefits of such an emphasis. Thus Richard Reid has repeatedly argued for a *longue durée* approach to conflicts in Eastern Africa, which traces the inter-generational genealogies of violence and recognises its deep social, cultural and institutional roots.<sup>5</sup> Other historians of the region, such as Scott Straus and Daniel Branch,<sup>6</sup> acknowledge patterns of continuity but favour an approach that closely examines contingent factors in conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, these approaches are of course compatible, much like a panoramic and a macro lens on the same camera. Each approach affords insights barred to the other by its lack of width or focus. Yet in another sense, these approaches are not merely alternative angles. They are perspectively related, but not symmetrical interdependent: without a prior examination of endogenous and contingent conflict dynamics, a 'deep historical' approach will produce not only vaguer but in fact divergent and reductionistic narratives. The much-needed *longue durée* approach called for by Richard Reid, in other words, is dependent on preceding analyses of the more intimate, local and contingent dynamics of conflict. Without this groundwork, such an approach is unable to subvert or qualify deep-seated assumptions about conflicts being driven

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5. See especially Richard Reid, *Frontiers of Violence*. Much the same argument is developed in his *War in Pre-Colonial East Africa* and in *Warfare in African History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012).

6. See Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau*.

7. See the discussion in the introductory chapter. Both approaches have close affinities with opposite methods celebrated within the Annales school: cf. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II* (Arman Colin: Paris, 1949); Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Village Occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Editions Gallimard: Paris, 1978).

primarily by their 'master cleavages'; without this groundwork, such an approach remains limited to highlighting parallel historical patterns, but is unable to link them causatively.

Ongoing difficulties in harmonising these opposite approaches largely stem from the remaining paucity of studies examining critical junctures in the wider East African region's twentieth century history before the early 1990s.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the close analysis of the Terror's conflict dynamics undertaken by this study contributes a further necessary building block towards future projects examining collective violence in the Horn of Africa over the *longue durée*.

Close attention to endogenous conflict dynamics has also allowed this study to examine the Terror's shifting patterns of control and violence. Both over time and over space patterns of effective territorial and social control varied considerably, altering the modes of violence at the local level. In this regard, two findings are particularly notable: on the one hand, the severity of state violence in particular localities corresponded closely to the extent of local contestation. All parts of Addis Ababa were touched and affected by the Terror, but not in equal measure: the neighbourhoods of Mercato, of Gulele and of Piassa, stretching north-eastwards to the University Campuses of Arat Kilo and Sedest Kilo, became particular foci of state violence. These were the neighbourhoods within which the civilian opposition had the most support and many of its operational bases. In part, regime-associated violence in these neighbourhoods was especially intense due to the brutality of local Kebele leaders and

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. David Anderson and Øystein Rolandsen, 'Violence as politics in eastern Africa, 1940-1990: legacy, agency, contingency', in *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol.8, no.4 (2014), 539-57

*Abyot Tebeka* squads. Locally threatened by EPRP guerrillas and afforded arms and impunity by the regime, regime-authorized militias adopted particularly repressive methods in areas that were recognised EPRP strongholds.

On the other hand, however, a more complex, nuanced and perhaps surprising picture emerges when such spatial patterning is considered alongside temporal changes to the modes of violence. For regime-sponsored campaigns of revolutionary violence were at their most intense, and the Terror hence at its peak, when contestation was rapidly receding. The Terror's state-controlled violence peaked in late 1977 and early '78, when Derg control over Addis Ababa was near hegemonic, but still sufficiently contested to warrant a violent response. Oral testimonies converge with archival and published sources in representing the closing months of the Terror, in which the civilian opposition was reduced to a shadow of its former self, as the most systematically and comprehensively violent.

The reasons for the late escalation of state violence, this study has argued, cannot be reduced to the official proclamation of 'Red Terror' by the Derg. Rather, it is rooted in the regime's access to local information about opponents on which effective, selective violence depends. This information became more readily accessible following the establishment of growing local control and following notable improvements to the Derg's security services. These developments allowed residents to collaborate without fear of counter-denunciation,<sup>9</sup> while essential information about opposition activists and structures were extracted through the snowballing application of systematic torture. Local intelligence thus gleaned was used by the Derg's security apparatus and by the

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9. Tellingly, EPRP leader Kiflu Tadesse indicates that a key objective of the party's violence had been "to deter people from assisting the regime": *The Generation Part II*, 157-8. Fear of counter-denunciation and retribution limited the regime's access to local information, and hence its ability to carry out selective violence, during the earlier phases of the Terror.

increasingly supervised Kebele offices to dismantle and eliminate any remaining forms of urban dissent.

During the earlier phases of the Terror, state violence had been piecemeal and lacking in centralised coherence. Indiscriminate violence had proven inefficient, as seen most clearly in the popular backlash against the first search campaign, the Berhanena Selam killings and the May Day massacres.<sup>10</sup> Selective violence, on the other hand, had been constrained by limited access to local information and by the Derg's reliance on largely autonomous actors at the Kebele level. The political will to coordinate state terror was hence present, but the capacity to do so was not. In the aftermath of the Terror, by contrast, collaborating residents and local information were forthcoming. But the urban opposition had ceased to pose a credible threat, while the population had internalised the logic of the Terror and learned not to voice public dissent. It was only during the officially declared 'Red Terror' of late 1977 and early '78, therefore, that "the organizational demand for information [met] its individual supply",<sup>11</sup> and therefore that the political will to conduct a state-coordinated campaign of revolutionary terror was fully implemented. The result were the most lethal months of revolutionary urban violence.

Recognition of these patterns and modes of violence has at least three significant implications for our understanding of the Ethiopian Terror. Firstly, the aggregate nature of the period's violence needs to be emphasised. Whereas both the historiography of the revolution and the Red Terror trials have assumed uniform and readily discernible motives behind particular acts of violence, these assumptions have been shown to be

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10. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 202-4; *Ethiopian Herald*, 3 April 1977: 'Six Persons Executed for Dastardly Inhuman Murder of 24 Persons'; Cf. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 60.

11. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 13.

simplistic. As seen most clearly during the decentralising phase of the Terror, which climaxed in the "embarrassing chaos" of the *Netsa Ermeja*,<sup>12</sup> the period's violence was produced synergistically but distinguishably by supralocal and local actors. The goals of Kebele leaders, for instance, were commonly more parochial and personal than the Derg's public discourses that facilitated their pursuit. The diverse motives of different actors converged in the production of the Terror's violence, but they cannot therefore be assumed to be identical. They can and need to be disaggregated. It was only during the Derg's conclusive 'Red Terror' campaign that a greater degree of centralised control resulted in a closer affinity between the regime's targets and its violence.

Secondly, recognition of changing modes of violence in the Ethiopian Terror, and appreciation of its aggregate production, indicate the need to qualify the often invoked category of 'political violence'. This study has shown how in search campaigns, in mass confession sessions, in interrogations and even in the EPRP's later selection of targets for assassinations, actors expressed ulterior motives in political language. The macro-political cleavages of the time constituted the Terror's readily invoked legitimising framework, but they do not therefore suffice to explain the period's violence. While the Ethiopian Terror brought the political sphere to bear on private and local social relations, violence rooted in the latter cannot be reduced to political causes. The category of political violence needs to be qualified and problematised.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, an emphasis on the role of endogenous conflict dynamics in driving and shaping the Terror implies a methodological need to approach the period's violence 'from below', as well as through the more conventional macro-political lenses. The

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12. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28-9.

13. Cf. Kalyvas, 'The Ontology', *passim*.

Terror certainly had important geopolitical and national ramifications, but it was carried out at the local level. In order to understand the role of experiences of violence and of local dynamics in shaping the Terror, this thesis has therefore triangulated an approach to the period 'from below' with macro-political and international perspectives. In so doing, it has brought to the study of the Terror historiographical methods common in the wider scholarship on collective violence, but hitherto marginalised in Ethiopia's revolutionary context. This has facilitated the further insertion of the Ethiopian Terror into wider discussions concerning histories of conflict.

The Terror's rival campaigns of revolutionary violence represented at once the breakdown of an old social order and a struggle over the establishment of a new one. The period's decentralised violence, marked by competing claims to legitimacy, highlights the dissolution of socially agreed differentiations between types of violence, some legitimate and others not. Without such differentiations, as Girard has highlighted, no social order can exist.<sup>14</sup> Only where society distinguishes between crime and punishment, between violence that is order-threatening and violence that is order-upholding, can a social order exist and collective violence be averted.<sup>15</sup> Whilst such distinctions are commonly masked behind legitimising narratives, they are rooted in often violent performances of power relations. The 1974 revolution abolished the imperial social order, leaving the Derg to inherit a state apparatus whose violence the urban population no longer ordinarily differentiated from violence wrought against it.

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14. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, passim.

15. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', 57; Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 7.

The line separating legitimate and illegitimate violence had become an object of contestation, envisioned in conflicting ways by rival political groups.

This study has pointed to a number of ways in which the lack of an agreed differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and the attendant crisis of legitimacy, were in evidence during the Ethiopian Terror. Most transparent was the EPRP's representation of its own violence in a linguistic register of legitimacy usually reserved for the state. The party hence claimed to carry out "arrests", "confiscations" and the "sentencing" of opponents.<sup>16</sup> That such language continues to define EPRP-associated narratives decades later demonstrates not only the party's self-understanding as an "embryonic state structure",<sup>17</sup> but also the extent to which the illegitimacy of the military-controlled state was engrained in the opposition's contemporary perceptions. Much the same contestation of legitimacy was evident in rival claims on the concept of 'Red Terror', invoked by the EPRP,<sup>18</sup> by the Derg<sup>19</sup> and at least by supporters of Meison.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the decentralised and non-transparent nature of the Terror itself undermined a clear distinction between criminal violence and state-sanctioned violence, since the responsible party and the rationale behind locally enacted violence was not always apparent.

Yet the violence of the Ethiopian Terror was not merely the result and catalyst of a breakdown in social order. It was also the foundation on which a new social order was

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16. Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 41, 182, 319-20; Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror*, 17.

17. Toggia, 'The revolutionary endgame', 272.

18. *Democrasia*, vol.4, no.11, Nehase 26 1968 E.C. [1 September 1976]; cf. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012.

19. FBIS-SSA-77-204, 'PMAC official calls for war on counter-revolutionaries', 20 October 1977.

20. *Addis Zemen*, Ter 24 1969 E.C. [1 February 1977]; cf. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 27.

established. While the Derg's revolutionary and nationalist discourse were designed to provide the regime with a modicum of international and domestic legitimacy, it was on the foundation of the Terror's state violence that an acceptance of Derg rule, and hence the social order of socialist Ethiopia, was enforced. This, ultimately, was the objective of the Terror from the Derg's point of view: to re-establish and impose a renewed distinction between criminal, regime-defying violence on the one hand and legitimate, state-sanctioned violence on the other. The costly success of the Derg's revolutionary violence thus shaped Ethiopia's new social order, which would sustain military rule for the subsequent decade. In this carefully delimited sense, the Terror did indeed represent a "'creative' or at least 'constituent' force" in Ethiopian society and politics.<sup>21</sup> The period's collective violence was at once the result of the disintegration of a social order and the means by which a new one was established.

We have noted that the Terror's collective violence was produced jointly by local and supralocal actors, resulting in a period of repression on which Ethiopia's military rule was established. This observation raises important but persistently ignored questions concerning the institutional and organisational structures that enabled or restricted local agency. How did the agency of local actors relate to that of supralocal actors? And how was this relation structurally mediated?

Narratives of the Ethiopian Terror have vacillated between two unreconciled explanations for the period's barbaric violence: some writers have adopted a 'dispositional-individual' approach, interpreting extreme violence as the "unpredictable

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21. Aijmer and Abbink, *Meanings of Violence*, xii.

acts" of "misfits, crazy and mad people".<sup>22</sup> The revolutionary situation is depicted as a facilitating framework, bringing dangerous persons to public notoriety by enabling them to act on their dispositions. The emphasis thus lies squarely on personal agency, with the role of organisational structures reduced to a permissive context. On the other hand, interpreters including the Special Prosecutor's Office have assumed a close identification between supralocal actors and local violence, mediated by the organisational structures of the Derg's security apparatus.<sup>23</sup> Here, the personal agency of local actors is reckoned to be submissive to, or at least aligned with, the will of supralocal actors.<sup>24</sup>

Neither model is satisfactory. In their place, this study has proposed an understanding of the Terror's violence as the result of normative social and organisational contexts. These are produced jointly by supralocal actors, who established, armed and sanctioned local institutions; and by local actors, who shaped the operational cultures and organisational processes of these institutions. This understanding follows the overwhelming direction of interdisciplinary scholarship on collective violence in locating its genesis in situational social contexts, rather than in individual predisposition or in rigid command structures.<sup>25</sup> Local agency is neither exalted nor demoted on this understanding. Rather, it is seen to operate within social and organisational contexts which are in part of its own making.

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22. Felekech Metaferia, *Sparkle*, 246.

23. And, one might add, by the EPRP's organisational command structure in the case of anti-regime violence.

24. See for example SPO, *ደግሞ የዘለ ዶሴ*, passim.

25. See for instance Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*; Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*; Philip Zimbardo, 'A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil'.

Examples of this dynamic abound: the local terror of *Abyot Tebeka* squads in Kebeles, the assassinations carried out by the EPRP's Urban Defense squads and the torture that was endemic in detention facilities across Addis Ababa all bear it out. In each case, local violence workers operated with the freedoms afforded - and the constraints imposed - by operational cultures that they had themselves shaped, but whose structures had been instituted by supralocal actors. The differences between analogous institutions across the capital highlight the local agency involved in defining operational cultures: in some Kebeles, for instance, militias were not even armed,<sup>26</sup> while in others they established notorious local reigns of terror. The overriding commonalities between analogous institutions, meanwhile - *Abyot Tebeka* squads and provisional detention facilities were established in Kebeles across Addis Ababa, for instance - indicate the agency of supralocal actors in establishing, structuring and in many cases supervising such operational frameworks.

Critically, these normative social and organisational contexts changed over the course of the Terror. As this study has shown, this occurred in ways that have hitherto gone unheeded in the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution. Most significantly, the growing centralised control over exercises of collective violence from late 1977, resulting in the bureaucratisation of its processes and practices, has been largely ignored. The decentralisation of violence that defined the Terror during earlier months, by contrast, is widely acknowledged and emphasised.

To address this imbalance, the structure of this thesis has proposed an alternative periodisation of the Ethiopian Terror, and hence a revised understanding of its changing modes of violence. It follows Bahru Zewde's proposed periodisation in discerning an

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26. Abera Yemane Ab, 'The defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution', 95.

opening phase from September 1976, in which momentum lay with the EPRP's terror campaigns that generated a consequential atrocity environment.<sup>27</sup> It also seconds Bahru Zewde's interpretation of Mengistu Haile Mariam's internal coup on 3 February 1977 as a defining turning point. This new phase of the Terror, it has argued, came as the Derg instituted a range of campaigns to weaken the civilian opposition at the local level: the arming of local vigilantes, the institutionalisation of search campaigns and the promotion of coercive 'mass confession' meetings. All of these campaigns entailed a decentralisation of the state's means and discourses of violence.

Bahru Zewde regards the brutal chaos of 1977 May Day massacres and of the subsequent *Netsa Ermeja* as a third and final phase of revolutionary violence, leading up to and climaxing in the officially declared 'Red Terror' of late 1977.<sup>28</sup> Such a reading, this study has argued, is problematic in two distinct ways: on the one hand, the decentralised violence of the *Netsa Ermeja* was the direct result of the campaigns instituted by the radical Derg from February 1977. The relation between these campaigns and the devolved authority that defined the *Netsa Ermeja* was one of fruition, not discontinuity. On the other hand, Bahru Zewde's proposed periodisation ignores the growing establishment of centralised control over local violence that attended the Derg's 'Red Terror' of late 1977, or the bureaucratisation of collective violence that defined it. As this study has argued, this later repression ought to be understood as a distinct phase of the Terror, marked by a new mode of state violence: practices of violence were brought under centralised control, professionalised and

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27. See the most authoritative periodisation to date in Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror'.

28. Bahru Zewde, 'The history of the Red Terror', 28-9.

inscribed into state institutions, thereby defining socialist Ethiopia beyond the assumed 'end' of the urban Terror.

A particular facet of this process ought to be highlighted here, namely the role of the German Democratic Republic in enabling this final phase of state violence. The examination of the East German State Security's involvement in the Ethiopian Terror forms a central contribution of this thesis to the comparative historiography of the Cold War in Africa. The structural advice, modern espionage devices and training received from East Germany facilitated the development of the Derg's security apparatus, on which the centralisation and bureaucratisation of collective violence during the Terror's closing stage was founded.

State terror in early revolutionary Ethiopia, then, evolved in three stages: it began as a sporadic, haphazard attempt to eliminate the growing and threatening civilian opposition. Next, the state's means and discourses were devolved to local residents in the hope of "plucking out"<sup>29</sup> opponents at the grassroots level, triggering the violent chaos of the *Netsa Ermeja*. Finally, greater centralised control over local violence was established, as East German support vastly improved the capabilities of the Derg's security apparatus. The state's co-ordinated use of selective violence resulted in the most violent months of Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence, which brought an end to open expressions of dissent.

The EPRP's campaign of revolutionary violence, meanwhile, moved in the opposite direction. The party's centralised control diminished as the Terror unfolded,

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29. መግባር ዘመቻ ['A plucking/uprooting campaign'] in the parlance of the time. Cf. Gebru Tareke, 'The history of the Ethiopian Revolution', 49.

progressively dismantling its organisational structures and resulting in more decentralised, and increasingly more sporadic, acts of violence.

### ***(ii) Legacies of the Terror***

The bureaucratisation of collective violence during the Red Terror entailed the inscription of its means and memories of repression into state-society relations. The period therefore cast shadows over urban Ethiopia that reached beyond the demise of the Derg. Socialist Ethiopia's social order was founded on the violence of the Terror, which had not only preserved military rule but also terminated earlier revolutionary debates. Yet particular institutions and practices that emerged during the Terror both defined and outlived military rule.<sup>30</sup> Urban Ethiopia's empowered Kebeles, for instance, which were used to control, coerce and mobilise urban residents, were retained by the EPRDF regime after 1991. Legacies of the Terror were hence both immediate and long-lasting.

Civilians in Addis Ababa responded to the new social order, founded on the violence and memory of the Terror, in one of three ways: some conformed, acquiescing to Derg rule and often retreating into a scarred private sphere. Others sought to continue their resistance to military rule by joining insurgencies in the rural areas. Others again sought to leave the country, generating Ethiopia's first sizeable and permanent diaspora.

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30. On the continuation of methods honed during the Terror - from house searches over systematised torture to forms of collective punishment - in later socialist Ethiopia see Balsvik, *The Quest for Expression*, 86-7.

Each of these responses bequeathed Ethiopian state and society with deep and consequential legacies.

Most immediate were the effects on state-society relations in urban Ethiopia. Gone was the political fervour and voluntary activism by a vast range of citizens that had at once sustained and challenged the early Derg. Gone, too, were convictions of an empowered society using the revolutionary state to deliver on the promises of progress. In their place, the Terror had left institutions and practices of governance that controlled urban social life to an unprecedented degree. The Terror had revealed the cost of political dissent, but it had also provided the state with new institutional means of control, from a vastly expanded security apparatus to a deeply intrusive structure of local administration. The Terror had permanently changed state-society relations in urban Ethiopia.

In the rural areas, by contrast, the Terror gave a significant boost to armed resistance against the Derg. As its urban structure disintegrated, the EPRP began to move supporters to its guerrilla base at Assimba in Tigray. Many other urban activists opted to join one of the ethno-nationalist insurgent movements, which received a significant boost in membership as a result.<sup>31</sup> Following the defeat of the EPRP's rural army by the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front,<sup>32</sup> numerous EPRP members equally joined the ethno-nationalist struggles. In triggering an expansion of membership and support for the ethno-nationalist movements, the Terror therefore had a considerable effect on the ultimate demise of the Derg and on the shape of Ethiopia's post-socialist order.

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31. Mulubirhan Adane, 'A history of Tigray under the Derg', 99; cf. Assefa Endeshaw, *Perspectives for Change*, 39.

32. Cf. Asmamaw Hailu, **ኢ.ሕ.አ.ወ. የኢ.ት.ዮ.ጵ.ያ ሕዝባዊ አብዮታዊ ሠራዊት** ['EPRP: The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army'] (Addis Ababa, 2003 E.C. [2011]); Interview, Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012.

Equally consequential was the Terror's effect on changing patterns of migration, contributing to the generation of a large and permanent Ethiopian diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Alongside other push factors associated with the Derg regime, ranging from forced conscription over drought and famine to religious and ethnic persecution, the Terror drove hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians to flee their country. Refugee camps in Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan were filled with Ethiopians. Since these refugees were, in the context of the global cold war, regarded as dissenters voting against communism with their feet, many were able to migrate onwards to Western countries.<sup>34</sup> It was against this backdrop of revolutionary violence that the substantial Ethiopian diasporas in Canada, the United States, Sweden and England were established.

In urban Ethiopia, meanwhile, the Terror effected social changes that extended beyond society's relations to the state. The personal cost of the period's violence was immense. Most obvious is the death toll, which left families across urban Ethiopia bereaved and in many cases economically deprived. Such consequences could be felt all the more acutely due to the erosion of social trust and support structures in the aftermath of the Terror's denunciations and local conflicts.<sup>35</sup>

Psychological trauma is notoriously difficult to gauge, but it is evident that one informant spoke for many survivors when he declared that due to his experiences of the Terror, he "lost [his] happiness throughout [his] life".<sup>36</sup> For a generation of urban Ethiopians, the Terror was a life-defining period. This was perhaps most starkly the case

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33. Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*, 3-7.

34. Peter Koehn, *Refugees from Revolution: US Policy and Third-World Migration* (Westview Press: Boulder, 1991); Solomon Getahun, *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants*, 40, 137.

35. Cf. Interview, Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012.

36. Interview, Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012; cf. Abbink, 'Transformations of violence', 72.

for the many survivors who developed mental health conditions in the immediate aftermath of the urban violence. While no reliable data on mental health in socialist Ethiopia exists, informants were unanimous in observing the proliferation of a mental health crisis in the late 1970s. In the absence of apposite medical facilities, such conditions also placed a permanent burden of care on affected families.<sup>37</sup>

For thousands of young activists, experiences of the Terror's collective violence led to a profound disillusionment with revolutionary politics. Visions of change were no longer projected onto the public stage. Abbink's claim that urban Ethiopians looking to the political future in the wake of the Terror saw it "through the red screen of the past"<sup>38</sup> aptly captures the depoliticising effects of the Terror. The retreat from political life was reflected in Ethiopian universities and academic study, focal points of political activism in the preceding decade. As one visiting Professor lamented: "gone is the passion for politics at the University and even, it seems, for learning."<sup>39</sup> Related were the religious revivals that shaped urban Ethiopia after the Terror. Evangelical churches in particular mushroomed despite persecution, populated by lapsed revolutionaries whom they provided with a new identity, hope and register by which to process their experiences of collective violence.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, this study has argued that the Terror played an integral part in reshaping images of Ethiopia in the international imagination. Despite the expulsion of western journalists and the Ogaden war's eclipsing effects, reports of Ethiopia's urban violence

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37. Cf. Interview, Shiferaw Bekele, 21 March 2012.

38. Abbink, 'Transformations of violence', 73.

39. Colburn, 'The tragedy of Ethiopia's intellectuals', 138.

40. See especially Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia*, 278-83.

leaked to the international media and to human rights organisations.<sup>41</sup> Such reports revived centuries-old European imageries of a destitute biblical land in the mountains of East Africa, taking the place of equally biblically-themed narratives about a glorious ancient Solomonic kingdom.<sup>42</sup> Such imaginings would find their culmination and icon in the famine of 1984. As Sorenson aptly wrote, "the former dream kingdom became [in the popular culture of the West] one of nightmares, and Ethiopia now serves as a synonym for disaster."<sup>43</sup>

Narratives about the Terror are thus closely intertwined with the period's legacies. This connection has become all the more apparent as political groups, including subsequent regimes, have sought to instrumentalise memories of the Terror in order to legitimate their programmes and, in some cases, in order to rebrand the international image of Ethiopia.

### ***(iii) Memorialisation of the Terror***

For many survivors of the Ethiopia Terror, memories of the period remain not only traumatic but also deeply personal. Yet this study has shown that memories have also been collective structured and disseminated. Readily distinguishable narrative traditions have been traced, proposing rival interpretations of the Terror and its violence. Driven

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41. The single most influential reports were Gunnar Hasselblatt aka Hans Eerik, 'Boy of 14 is shot dead after being tortured in Ethiopian Red Terror', *The Times*, 22 March 1978; and Amnesty International. Newsletter from Ethiopia, April 1978.

42. Cf. Carnochan, *Golden Legends*, passim.

43. John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1993), 57.

by presentist concerns as much as by desires to uphold the memory of past sacrifices, these narrative structures have been highly politicised and accordingly disputed. The memorialisation of the Terror hence remains a contested process, in which the past is closely bound up with, and at times overshadowed by, the present.

The most significant public project engaging with the history of the Terror has been the EPRDF-instituted Red Terror trials, in which suspected perpetrators of state violence were prosecuted over the course of a decade and a half. The trials forced public discussions and exposures of the Terror's abuses. But their political objective escaped few observers and alienated many.<sup>44</sup>

In the trials, memories the Terror were inextricably intertwined with narratives about a new Ethiopia and about its leadership: the prosecutions were designed to redeem Ethiopia from the very images of despondency that the Terror had played a role in shaping, and to ascribe this redemption to the new regime. The Terror was presented as the negative foil against which the EPRDF's Ethiopian state was defined, a new dawn marked by ethno-federalist democracy, development and respect for human rights.

Yet the trials did not succeed in embodying this narrative for long. They were eclipsed by transitional justice processes in Rwanda and South Africa, thwarted by drawn-out proceedings and undermined by the EPRDF's own human rights record. In their place, the recently opened Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Addis Ababa became the most prominent site of memory dedicated to the Terror. Like the trials, this study has argued, the Museum has been caught between its purposes as witness to the traumatic memories of the past and as a present political instrument. Unlike the trials, it has succeeded in telling an EPRDF-exalting narrative of redemption about the Terror.

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44. Cf. Tronvoll, 'The quest for justice', *passim*.

Critically, this political edge has generated discourses about the Terror that seek to smooth over the period's complexities and ambiguities. The tendency has been to employ the period's "master narrative of cleavage" - between the military regime and civilian groups on the one hand, and among the latter on the other - "to ex post facto simplify, streamline, and cover up the [conflict's] ambiguities and contradictions".<sup>45</sup> In this, the scripting of memories about the Terror has been in contradiction with the goals of academic history.

But over against these reductionistic tendencies, dissenting voices of participants have called for a wider spectrum of experiences and narratives of the Terror to be memorialised. Survivors of Ethiopia's revolutionary violence have established institutional frameworks, most notably the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center,<sup>46</sup> and made personal efforts<sup>47</sup> to uphold and share memories of the Terror and to advance inquiries into its history. Such initiatives indicate that persisting tensions between entrenched patterns of collective memory and critical historical approaches to the Terror need not remain. The emerging scholarship on the period and Ethiopia's memorialisation can converge on a polyphone history of the Terror, reflecting the period's range of experiences, voices and perspectives.

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45. Kalyvas, 'The ontology', 487.

46. Kissi, 'Remembering Ethiopia's Red Terror'.

47. For example, the film-maker Ermias Wolde Amlak is working on an oral history project with survivors, while Gedion Wolde Amanuel has published an anthology of Terror-related sources: *The Day of the Martyrs*.

## **Implications**

The sources and findings presented in this study open the door for new inquiries into the history of the Ethiopian Terror. Approaches developed in this thesis can find further application to deepen our understanding of the period, while answers found have raised new questions. This concluding section highlights implications of this study and of its findings for the historiography and memorialisation of the Ethiopian Terror.

Integral to this research have been oral interviews with a diverse range of contemporary witnesses. These have shed new light on the experiences and local dynamics of revolutionary violence, as well as on its contested process of memorialisation. Significantly, these interviews also signal that many participants are now prepared to publicly recount their memories. This recognition invites a broader oral history project to gather and retain an archive of participant memories. The Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center is currently initiating such a project.

International archives, hitherto ignored in the study of the Ethiopian Terror, have equally proven to be rich and fruitful sources. Such archives provide alternative and complementary perspectives on Ethiopian history, which need to be inserted further into the country's historiography. Some international archives, most notably perhaps those in Cuba, are yet to be fully opened to researchers and hold great promise. Others are already accessible but remain insufficiently exploited. In reading Ethiopian archives alongside others from Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, this study has shown the potential import of the latter as tools for Ethiopian history.

Yet the implications of these international archives are not limited to methodological considerations. Especially in examining the involvement of the East German State Security in the Terror, this study has furthered our understanding the oft-neglected international and geopolitical dimension of Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence. The Stasi archives in Berlin combine with available Ethiopian documents to highlight the forms 'socialist solidarity' took, from the provision of modern intelligence hardware to training and advice. Yet the archives divulge little detail concerning the local ties and direct involvement of German agents in the Terror. This critical chapter of African Cold War history requires further examination, to be pursued through oral interviews with German as well as Ethiopian participants. This study's examination of the archival record provides the necessary foundation for such further research.

The spectrum and triangulation of sources on which this study is founded in part represents a response to an early setback: when this research began in 2010, the handover and opening of the SPO archive had been initiated. Yet the Ethiopian government reneged on its commitment to make this vast archive accessible to researchers. Its opening remains the unanimous demand of Ethiopianist scholars.<sup>48</sup> The archive promises to bring new depths and nuance to our understanding of the Terror's history. But if access is eventually granted, it will also present historians with the same conceptual challenge faced by the Special Prosecutor: how to relate the agency, and hence determine the responsibility, of local and supra-local actors. The Red Terror trials adopted a pragmatic but analytically inadequate approach to this challenge, which widely assumed a single will and purpose in the making of the Terror. In contrast, this

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48. The preservation and opening of the SPO archive was a core demand of Ethiopia's leading historians at the September 2013 African Union Human Rights Memorial Consultative Conference in Addis Ababa.

study has offered a first conceptualisation of the aggregate production of collective revolutionary violence, produced jointly but distinguishably by local and supra-local actors. This is the framework that will need to be applied if or when the Special Prosecutor's archive is examined. The same approach will be required in researching other emerging local archives, such as the those of the Ministry of Interior that are currently being inventoried at the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia. The conceptual approaches developed in this study hence form the foundation for future research on the Terror's collective violence .

On the basis of its reading and triangulation of new sources, this study has opened up lines of inquiry that require further examination. Most immediately, its questions and framework of analysis need to be extended beyond the confines of Addis Ababa. The history of the Terror across Ethiopia's cities and towns is yet to be examined.<sup>49</sup> If the SPO archive is indeed opened, it will likewise allow for more detailed histories of the local Terror in particular neighbourhoods of the capital.

Topically, too, this study has highlighted key themes that require further investigation. It has shown sexual violence to be a pervasive feature of the Terror, which has been widely ignored in the Red Terror trials as much as in the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution. While a notoriously difficult and culturally sensitive topic, further research remains to be done in this area. Much scope also remains for a study of the role of women in early revolutionary Ethiopia. While the historiography remains dominated by male voices and perspectives,<sup>50</sup> this study has demonstrated the

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49. Solomon Getahun is currently researching the history of the Terror in Gondar. Besides this, local histories of the Terror outside the capital have only been touched on in MA History dissertations from Addis Ababa University.

50. Notable exceptions include Konjit Berhan, ጥርካታ; and Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky*.

involvement of women in every area of contemporary struggles: from the leadership of civilian parties and of Kebele militias to involvement in grassroots activism.

The interrelations between the urban Terror and wider conflicts in the Horn of Africa, from the interstate war with Somalia to the multiple ethno-nationalist insurgencies, have been seen throughout this study. These connections shaped the dynamics of the Terror, not only through the connections between rural and urban guerilla activities but especially as the international response to the Somali invasion of the Ogaden enabled the Derg to launch a new phase of state terror. Significantly, though, they also shaped the Terror's legacies: the boost to rural insurgencies and patterns of flight and migration were equally mediated and shaped by the nexus of regional conflicts. To probe and examine these interconnections, rather than to merely recognise and outline them, remains a task for future research projects.

Finally, the findings of this study have important implications for the Terror's memorialisation process. In its motto of 'Never Again', the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum rightly emphasises the impact that our understanding of the past has on the making of the future. But the processes that shaped the Terror's collective violence - from the othering of opponents to the making of violence-facilitating operational structures - are yet to take their central place in this collective understanding. The processes and synergies that generated the period's collective violence remain eclipsed by a narrow emphasis on macro-political divisions. If an understanding of past mass violence is to contribute to the prevention of its future repetition, the findings of this study need to find a place in the Terror's memorialisation process.

In conclusion, then, this study has surveyed and advanced the frontiers of our understanding of the Terror and argued for a reassessment of its position in the historiography of modern Ethiopia. It has inserted Ethiopia's revolutionary urban violence into wider conversations in the African historiography of conflict, as well as into interdisciplinary discussions about collective violence. The hope is that the contributions of this study will not only swell the growing wave of scholarship on the Ethiopian revolution, but also serve as a foundation and catalyst for further research and find an echo in the memorialisation of the Ethiopian Terror.

## **Appendix: Red Terror Historical Interviews**

*The following 34 interviews have been conducted over the past four years with informants in five countries: Ethiopia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Belgium. Many were held during annual or biannual visits to Addis Ababa, which lasted about a month at a time. Others were organised during a three-months stay in Washington, DC, during the summer of 2012. A minority were conducted in Europe. Informants were selected to represent a broad range of political positions and of life experiences during the Terror.*

*Interviews consisted of informal conversations, most lasting several hours. While not rigidly structured, they were loosely ordered around recurring thematic clusters, allowing for comparison and for triangulation with each other and with written sources. Two were conducted in Amharic (Kahssay Tekeste and Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik), all the others were held in English. Where possible interviews were recorded, and all that were have been transcribed in part or in full.*

### **Abera Yemane Ab, 13 December 2012**

Briefly the Governor of Sidamo in 1975, Abera was in charge of supervising Kebeles through the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing during the Terror. For this position, he was later tried and sentenced in the Red Terror trials. Abera was a leading member of Meison.

### **Aklilu Kebede, 20 August 2012**

Aklilu was a member of the EPRP Youth League and a local activist in the Arat Kilo neighbourhood. He was later imprisoned at Karchelle together with Meison's Haile Fida and with Tito Hiruy, who led the EPRP's Youth League.

### **Berhanu Disasa, 13 March 2011**

Berhanu was a resident of Gulele. As a government employee during the Terror, he sought to avoid entanglement in the internecine political conflicts of the day, but in regular conversations reflected on the dangers of such a position.

**Daniel Bekele, 2 March 2010**

A human rights lawyer imprisoned in the aftermath of the 2005 elections, Daniel left Ethiopia to write a DPhil on the legal history of the media in Ethiopia at the University of Oxford. The interview explored the opening, contestation and closing of media space in early revolutionary Ethiopia.

**Dawit Terefe, 27 and 31 December 2011**

Like many contemporaries, Dawit joined Youth Associations and discussion circles, but sought to eschew full identification with any one political organisation. In our interviews, he reflected particularly on the local politics of knowledge, identity and violence in his Gulele neighbourhood.

**Dima Negew, 2 March 2010**

Dima was deeply involved in the smaller political organisation *Ichat*, and later in the Oromo Liberation Front. Our interview examined his memories of and perspectives on the urban Terror's meanings and consequences for Oromo ethno-nationalism.

**Ermias Wolde Amlak, 7 and 29 March 2012**

A young activist seeking to emulate his politicised brothers, Ermias and his family experienced revolutionary violence in manifold forms, in the Sidist Kilo neighbourhood as well as in Gulele. Ermias has since used his profession as a film-maker to explore the history, memory and representation of the Terror. In our interviews, he reflected on the local and domestic dynamics of contestation and confrontation, on his experiences of incarceration and on the Terror's contested memorialisation process.

**Estifanos Terefe, 10 September 2012**

A teenager in the Gulele neighbourhood at the time of the Terror, Estifanos reflected on the ubiquity of political categories and affiliations in local youth culture. Our interview, one of many shared conversations about the Terror and its history, also considered the events surrounding the public execution of Girma Kebede, which Estifanos attended.

**Fentahun Tiruneh, June-September 2012**

Over more than three months of regular meetings in Washington, DC, Fentahun shared his memories of experiences in the late student movement, in the EPRP's urban structure and with the EPRA at its rural insurgency base in Assimba.

**Gedion Wolde Amanuel, 19 March 2012**

Gedion was first a member of the Ethiopian People's Youth League, then of the EPRP itself. His activities included involvement with the party's 'urban defense squads'. More recently, he has participated in the establishment of the 'Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum'.

**Girma Bashe, 14 March 2012**

Previously a student with Haile Fida in Europe, Girma returned to Ethiopia as a Meison member. He did not go underground with other members of the organisation. Instead, he continued to work with the Derg, becoming Mengistu Haile Mariam's translator for English, German and Portuguese.

**Hirut Abebe-Jiri, 16 June 2012**

Sympathising with the EPRP as a teenager in Gulele, Hirut was tortured and detained during the Terror. She later played a central role in US law suits against her former Kebele chairman Kelbessa Negew, and founded the Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center to preserve and advance memory and understanding of the period.

**Kahssay Tekeste, 19 March 2012**

Growing up as a teenager in the Tekle Haymanot neighbourhood, Kahssay was tortured and detained for three years during the Terror. He now leads a *Mehaber* ['mutual help association'] of more than 400 mothers of Red Terror victims from across the country. Our interview particularly explored experiences of incarceration.

**Kassahun Berhanu, 31 March 2010 and 24 August 2012**

Kassahun Berhanu was a member of Meison who led POMOA in Wellega. Our interviews explored experiences of the EPRP's violence and the Derg's repression, but equally the role and responsibility of Meison in shaping early revolutionary Ethiopia and its violence.

**Kebere Assefa, 24 August 2012**

In the aftermath of the Zemecha, Kebere became a Meison member. In our interview, he particularly reflected on his experiences of the local dynamics of conflict during the Terror, and on his political involvement with Meison.

**Kiflu Tadesse, 6 January 2012 and 19 July 2012**

A leader of the EPRP, Kiflu was a prominent actor in the party's urban activism and violence. Through the publication of a two-volume history of the EPRP, he has also established himself as one of the noted chroniclers of the period.

**Mahari Tsehaye, 25 August 2012**

A member of the EPRP's army at Assimba, Mahari reflected on his experiences of rural guerrilla warfare and the impact the urban Terror had on this.

**Mekonnen Getu, 13 April 2010**

Radicalised as a student in Europe, Mekonnen became a member of Meison. He returned to Ethiopia at the height of the Red Terror in order to reconstruct an urban base for Meison, which had disintegrated by this stage.

**Negede Gobeze, 13 and 21 December 2012**

Upon his return from studies in France, Negede assumed leadership responsibilities in Meison and became a member of POMOA. Our interviews engaged the organisation's policies and actions as much as his personal experiences of the period.

**Original Wolde Giorgis, 22 March 2012**

A resident of Mercato and a student at Addis Ababa University, Original joined the EPRP. Our interview focused on her experiences of activism, of imprisonment and of torture in several detention facilities, but also discussed the role of women in the revolutionary struggles of the time.

**Shiferaw Bekele, 9 September 2011 and 21 March 2012**

While the prominent historian was a contemporary witness to revolutionary Ethiopia's political upheavals, our interviews focused on analysis of the history, historiography and memory of the Terror more than on his own experiences.

**Shimelis Desta, 17 February 2011**

Previously the Court photographer of Emperor Haile Selassie I, Shimelis continued to work for the government after the revolution. In this function, he was commissioned to take graphic images of the Terror on the streets of Addis Ababa, which he later smuggled out of the country via diplomatic channels.

**Solomon Kebede, 15 August 2012**

As intelligence officer working for the the Criminal Investigation Department, Solomon experienced the Terror from the inside of the state's counter-insurgency. However, he also sympathised with the EPRP, leading to his eventual arrest and incarceration in 1978.

**Tadelech Haile Mikael, 30 March 2012**

Tadelech was politicised through her husband, the student leader and EPRP founder Berhane Meskel Redda. Having returned to Ethiopia during the Terror, she was arrested and imprisoned until 1991, giving birth to and raising a daughter in prison. Our

interview reviewed her life with Berhane Meskel and the split within the EPRP as well as her long and somber incarceration.

**Yeraswork Admassie, 20 and 26 September 2011**

Yeraswork was a prominent member of Meison. While working as an instructor at the Yekatit '67 Political School, he narrowly survived a bomb attack by the EPRP. Our interview reflected on experiences of EPRP terror and on Meison's own violence; on his life in government and resistance; and on the Terror's contested memorialisation process.

**Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, 10 March 2012**

Having founded a Youth Association in his Kazanchis Kebele, Yibkaw joined the local structure of the EPRP. He committed himself to a life of activism, for which he was eventually arrested and imprisoned for eight years. In our interview, he recounted his experiences of local activism and conflict, as well as of repression and incarceration at length.

**Yosef Kiros, 7 March 2012**

Appointed to the Special Prosecutor's Office at its founding in 1992, Yosef made the Red Terror trials his life's work. He is intimately familiar with the contents of the SPO archive, and consequently as knowledgeable about the Terror's local history as about its contested afterlife.

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*YeSafiw Hizb Demz*, no.19, Ter 1 1967 E.C. [9 January 1975], **የኢትዮጵያ**

**ሶሻሊዝም ወይስ ሳይንሳዊ ሶሻሊዝም** ['Ethiopian socialism or scientific socialism']

xv. *Special Prosecutor's Office in the Red Terror trials - Collated evidences presented at the trials*

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**ኃ/ማሪያም ላይ ያቀረበው ክስና የፌዴራል ከፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው**

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