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**“Let the Red Terror intensify”:
Political violence, governance and society in urban Ethiopia,
1976-78**

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SUMMARY: *From 1976 to 1978, urban Ethiopia was in the grip of rival campaigns of revolutionary violence. The period is now memorialised as one of unmitigated state terror. It is argued in this article that this conceptualisation fails to appreciate the multiple layers of agency and the significant changes to the mode of violence that occurred over these years. State terror in revolutionary Ethiopia was the outcome of a process, not a constant state of affairs. To better understand the Ethiopian Terror in its political and social dimensions, the joint production of violence by local and supra-local actors needs to be disaggregated and the evolution of the state’s repression needs to be understood. This repression went through successive stages of decentralisation and bureaucratisation. It is only when these stages are examined that the transformative impact of the Terror on Ethiopian society and state-society relations can be properly assessed.*

The overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 left Ethiopia with a power vacuum to be filled and a revolution to be defined. When a council of low-ranking military officers, known as the *Derg*, took charge of the revolutionary process, its legitimacy was vehemently disputed by leftist civilian organisations, which drew their strength and political perspectives from the formidable Ethiopian student movement. By late 1976, a double helix of conflicts was rapidly engulfing urban Ethiopia - one strand the confrontation between the military regime and its civilian opponents, the other the contest among the civilian left itself. In the following two years, thousands of Ethiopians, most of them young and many of them educated, lost their lives to competing campaigns of revolutionary terror. This violence was carried out in the name of the opposition Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) or, more commonly, of the military regime and those political organisations, led by the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (*Meison*), that had allied themselves with the government. The Terror

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.¹

The Ethiopian Terror years have been written about and memorialised as a period of sustained state terror.² The EPRDF's "Red Terror trials", which ran for the better part of two decades following the overthrow of the *Derg*,³ limited themselves to the prosecution of violence carried out in the name of the state and assumed considerable centralised control in their verdicts on senior government figures.⁴ Similarly, the "Ethiopian Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum", which opened in Addis Ababa's Meskel Square in 2010, conveys a simple narrative of state perpetrators and civilian victims, with no regard to shifts in agency and mode of violence. Such conceptualisations are problematic, obscuring as much as they reveal. For not only do they marginalise or disregard the competing campaigns of revolutionary violence that defined the Terror, most notably the EPRP's sustained assassination campaign;⁵ they also ignore the complex nature of the state's own violence, which underwent consequential changes as the agency of local actors and the control of the military regime shifted over time. State terror in revolutionary Ethiopia was the outcome of a process, not a constant state of affairs, and it showed itself in varying guises. The dynamics of violence that defined this

¹ The research on which this article is based was funded by an award from the AHRC. Estifanos Terefe provided valuable assistance in evaluating and translating source material.

² The most accentuated examples of this general tendency are Babile Tola, *To kill a generation* (Washington, DC: Free Ethiopia Press, 1989) and Michael Chege, "The Revolution Betrayed: Ethiopia, 1974-9", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 17, 3 (1979), 359-380.

³ Yacob Haile Mariam, "The Quest for Justice and Reconciliation: The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and the Ethiopian High Court", *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, 22, 3 (1999), 668-699; Firew Kebede Tiba, "The Mengistu Genocide Trial in Ethiopia", *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 5, 2 (2007), 513-528; Kjietil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer and Girmachew Alemu Aneme, eds., *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged* (Oxford: James Currey, 2009).

⁴ See Special Prosecutor's Office, ከፍል ሁለት: የፌዴራል ከፍተኛ ፍ/ቤት የሰጠው ውሣኔ ["Part Two: The verdict given by the Federal High Court"] (Addis Ababa, 2006).

⁵ The subject has recently been brought to public attention by the much-publicised publication of Hiwot Teferra, *Tower in the Sky* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2012).

process and the legacies that it bequeathed to state-society relations in Ethiopia for subsequent decades are the subject of this article.

Following an initial phase dominated by paralysing power struggles within the *Derg*, the development of revolutionary state terror in Ethiopia went through two interrelated but distinct stages. The first, beginning in February 1977, was a period of decentralisation, in which the regime's adoption of new strategies of revolutionary violence - the arming of citizens, the institution of comprehensive search campaigns and the convocation of so-called "mass-confession sessions" - decentralised the state's means of violence, leading to a plethora of localised reigns of terror. As a result of this process, the Ethiopian Terror was never merely a conflict between competing political groups. Its violence was as much bottom-up as it was top-down, produced by supra-local and local actors in synergistic but often distinguishable ways, reflective of local agendas as well as of the Terror's political master cleavage. The second stage, which began to emerge in July 1977, witnessed a re-assertion of the military regime's claims on the exercise of revolutionary violence, leading to an institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of violent practices that would define and indeed outlast the *Derg*'s rule. This process of bureaucratisation, whereby collective violence was normalised and brought under state control, has scarcely received any attention in the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution.

This article addresses these historiographical gaps by disaggregating the categories of state terror and political violence, describing the multiple layers of agency and the significant changes to the mode of violence that shaped the Ethiopian Terror. Following a brief introduction to the social and political context within which revolutionary collective violence erupted in urban Ethiopia, the two defining moments or stages of the *Derg*'s terror are examined: the process whereby the state's means of violence were decentralised, and subsequent efforts to establish government control over the exercise of "revolutionary measures", entailing a bureaucratisation of violent practices. The conclusion considers the broader implications of this history for our understanding of the Ethiopian Terror's place in the historiography, especially in relation to the Terror's role in defining the social order of Ethiopia under the *Derg*. It shows how the history of the Terror continues to affect state-society relations to this day.

The Ethiopian Terror: Background and Context

Among the most immediate transformations to attend the 1974 revolution were its effects on political space and practice. New political organisations, unions and associations surfaced and mobilised support, as the country experienced unprecedented degrees of political interest and participation, particularly among the younger generation. Across urban Ethiopia, the meaning and matrix of youth was being redefined by the revolutionary situation. Political concerns and identity markers subsumed other domains of life, and for many political activism became both a full-time occupation and an initiation into adulthood. Like others 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 in Addis Ababa. 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.”⁶

Political activism among the capital’s young, which had first occurred through a University group known as ‘the Crocodile Society’ in the early 1960s⁷ and increasingly gained currency within the student movement in the subsequent generation, came to be commonplace in the early years of the revolution. Marxism became the new orthodoxy as High School and University students joined the newly emerged political organisations in large

⁶ Aklilu Kebede, interviewed in Silver Springs, MD, 20 August 2012.

⁷ Randi R. Balsvik, *Haile Selassie’s Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1974* (East Lansing: African Studies Centre, Michigan State University, 1985), 118.

numbers, politicising their private and social lives. 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.” The discontinuity with the largely apolitical activities and aspirations of earlier generations of youths in the capital is evident.

While reverberating across societal divides, the new political activism was largely the product of the urban middle classes that had matured in the final decades of imperial rule. Emperor Haile Selassie I, seeking to check the power of the traditional nobility and needing to staff the developing bureaucracy of the Ethiopian state, had actively encouraged the formation of these new meritocratic middle classes, free from regional interests and supposedly loyal to the central court.⁸ The urban middle classes were defined by western education and distinguished by the performance and consumption of a westernised lifestyle.⁹ In one of the most critical studies of the Ethiopian student movement, Messay Kebede has argued that the encounter with western education led to an experience of “cultural dislocation” for the Ethiopians involved.¹⁰ Such dislocation proved fertile ground, however, for the new elite’s cosmopolitan linkages produced fruits of cultural hybridity that made late imperial Addis Ababa “the very essence of modernist audacity.”¹¹ Jazz music and the visual arts flourished, modernistic buildings were erected and intellectual discourses about progress and liberty - in some quarters increasingly identified with Marxist thought - proliferated. Embracing a new set of Ethiopian identities, at once urban and cosmopolitan, the urban middle classes produced many of the primary agents in the downfall of the imperial regime that they had been designed to bolster. The membership of both the radical Ethiopian student movement and of the political organisations that emerged from its midst was largely drawn from these urban middle classes.

⁸ Donald Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 183-4.

⁹ Marco di Nunzio, “The Arada Have Been Eaten: Living Through Marginality in Addis Ababa's Inner City” (D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 2012), chapter 3.

¹⁰ Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

¹¹ Francis Falceto, “Introduction” to *The Very Best of the Ethiopiques* (Audio CD, Buda Musique, 2005)

The two most significant civilian political organisations of the early revolutionary era, the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (*Meison*) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), had been founded by members of the student movement before the revolution erupted.¹² Neither organisation played a consequential role in the uprisings of 1974, but both used the political space these afforded to establish themselves in urban Ethiopia and to mobilise support. Initially, the organisations were united in their opposition to military rule and their demands for a “provisional people's government”.¹³ When Meison's international leadership returned to Ethiopia in early 1975, however, the organisation suspended its opposition, offering the *Derg* an alliance that would redefine the political map of revolutionary Ethiopia.

The early *Derg* was shaped by its attempts to address the dual challenge confronting it: how to institutionalise military rule while negotiating internal factions and conflicts. Violent responses to these challenges were a constant feature of *Derg* rule, brutally evidenced in the massacre of high officials of the *ancien régime* and of Aman Andom, the first revolutionary head of state, in November 1974.¹⁴ But alongside the recourse to violence, alternative responses developed. Following the propagation of the tame nationalist slogan *Ityopia Tikdem* [“Ethiopia First”], the military regime began to institute truly revolutionary policies. Its *zemecha* [“campaign”] for “development through cooperation”, in which 60.000 University and High School students were sent across the country to spread literacy and to educate peasants

¹² See the detailed accounts of the organisations' foundations in Andargachew Assegid, በአጭር የተቀጨ ረጅም ጉዞ፡ መኪሶን በኢትዮጵያ ሕዝቦች ትግል ውስት [“A Long Journey Cut Short: Meison in the struggle of the Ethiopian people”] (Addis Ababa: The Central Printing Press, 2000) and Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation: the History of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993).

¹³ E.g. “ዲሞክራሲያዊ ረፍብሊክ ወይስ የወታደር መንግስት” [“Democratic Republic or Military Rule”], የሳፊው ሕዝብ ድምፅ [“Voice of the Broad Masses” - Meison's organ], 5 (10 September 1974); “ለውጥ ለሕዝብ ብሕዝብ” [“Change for the people by the people”], ዲሞክራሲያ [“Democracy” - EPRP's organ], 3 (1 August 1974).

¹⁴ Asfa Wossen Asserate, *Ein Prinz aus dem Hause David* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007), chapter 1; Bahru Zewde, “The History of the Red Terror”, in Tronvol et al., *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials*, 23; Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: a Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 77.

from December 1974,¹⁵ was followed by nationalisation programmes and, most significantly, by comprehensive Land Reform in February 1975.¹⁶ The Land Reform subverted entrenched relations of property and power and proved hugely popular.¹⁷

Revolutionary Land Reform also triggered *Meison's* offer of “critical support”, which strengthened the *Derg's* legitimacy in the urban areas, provided it with a coherent ideological discourse and introduced efficient methods of political organisation and mobilisation. *Meison*, in turn, gained considerable influence and a number of ministerial posts. In control of the Provisional Office of Mass Organisational Affairs (POMOA) and with access to state media and resources, *Meison* was able to build a vigorous grassroots support network.¹⁸ Tensions with the numerically stronger EPRP, which accused *Meison* of selling the revolution for access to state power, rapidly escalated and militarised.¹⁹

In April 1976, following the EPRP's rejection of the regime's “Programme of the National Democratic Revolution”, which represented a last attempt to co-opt opposition as much as a roadmap for revolutionary Ethiopia's development,²⁰ violent confrontation appeared inevitable.²¹ The EPRP prepared itself by establishing “urban defense squads”, a militia force

¹⁵ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), 240; Donald Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chapter 2; Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1989), 26

¹⁶ Abera Yemane Ab, “The Defeat of the Ethiopian Revolution and the Role of the Soviet Union”, *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Horn of Africa (1987)*, 91-2.

¹⁷ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 101.

¹⁸ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 162.

¹⁹ Smaller political organisations, such as the Red Flag, *Wez League*, *Ichaat* and *Ma-lerid*, joined either the EPRP in opposition to the *Derg* or *Meison* in governing alliance with the military regime.

²⁰ POMOA, *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopia Information Center, 1977); Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 162.

²¹ David and Marina Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1978), 113.

briefed to obtain arms and funds as well as to defend EPRP members and property.²² By September 1976, violent confrontation engulfed Addis Ababa. The *Derg* began a campaign to repress the “anarchist” EPRP,²³ consisting of denunciations, detentions and sporadic executions of suspected regime opponents.²⁴ In contrast to the matured Terror of 1977, the *Derg*’s early repression was still accompanied by lengthy explanations and justifications of its violence. The EPRP concomitantly launched its strategy of “offensive defense”, a campaign of targeted assassinations aimed at government figures and supporters. The strategy was highly controversial within the party, resulting in a violent and consequential split. By March 1977, the campaign had claimed the lives of at least fifty high-profile government supporters²⁵ and instilled perceptions of an atrocity environment in regime figures, fanning the development of state terror.

The conflict was played out as much at the level of high politics as in the everyday interactions of urban communities on the ground. “At the time you couldn’t escape it,” the filmmaker Ermias Wolde Amlak recalls; “[when] you go to school, you find it; when you go to your neighbourhood to play football, you find it.”²⁶ The Terror was beginning to dominate urban life. *Kebele* associations in particular became fiercely contested sites of mobilisation and confrontation. The momentum during these months lay firmly with the EPRP’s assassination campaign. The regime’s response was paralysed by its internal power struggles, which saw a moderate wing formed around Alemayehu Hailu, Moges Wolde Mikael and Tafari Bante marginalise the radical faction of Mengistu Haile Mariam and POMOA in December

²² Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation, Part II: Ethiopia: Transformation and Conflict. The History of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 125.

²³ The denunciation of “anarchists” made the front page of the government dailies through September, beginning with the article: “PMAC Issues Warning: Subversive Activities of Anarchists Exposed”, 13 September 1976, *Ethiopian Herald*.

²⁴ E.g. “For Murder, Counter-Revolutionary Crimes: Twenty-Three Anarchists Executed”, 3 November 1976, *Ethiopian Herald*; “PMAC Announces Execution of 27 for Acts Inimical to Revolution”, 19 November 1976, *Ethiopian Herald*.

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

²⁶ Ermias Wolde Amlak, interviewed at the Goethe Institut, Addis Ababa, 7 March 2012.

1976 and January 1977.²⁷ This changed drastically when Mengistu Haile Mariam took control of the *Derg*.

The Decentralisation of Collective Violence

On 3 February 1977, Mengistu Haile Mariam had his prominent opponents within the *Derg* shot during a meeting of its Standing Committee, accusing them of plotting a “counter-revolutionary *coup d'état*”.²⁸ Their deaths spelt the end of the *Derg*'s era of contradictions and accommodations; opposing views could no longer be aired within the military regime.²⁹ Under Mengistu's chairmanship a more radical *Derg* emerged, unwilling to tolerate dissent and prepared to violently “pluck out”³⁰ and “liquidate”³¹ its opponents. The events of 3 February marked a decisive turning point in the Ethiopian Terror.³²

At a mass rally in Addis Ababa's Revolution Square on the following day, Mengistu produced a dramatic violence-legitimising performance, smashing bottles filled with red flu-

²⁷ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 188-9.

²⁸ “Counter-Revolutionary Coup Foiled: Revolutionary Measures Taken Against Ring-leaders”, 4 February 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*.

²⁹ Abera Yemane Ab, *The Defeat*, 94; see also 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: Office of Publications Services, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1979), 796.

³⁰ Gebru Tareke, “The History of the Ethiopian Revolution and the Red Terror” in Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Centre [hereafter ERTDRC], *Documenting the Red Terror: Bearing Witness to Ethiopia's Lost Generation* (Ottawa: ERTDRC, 2012), 49.

³¹ The infelicitous term was a favourite of the *Ethiopian Herald*, the government's English-language daily, and made almost daily front-page news. See for example “EPRP Leader Here Liquidated”, 25 March 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*; “Counter-Revolutionary Bandits Liquidated”, 26 March 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*; “AETU Calls on Workers to Wipe Out Assassins, Counter-Revolutionaries”, 27 March 1997, *Ethiopian Herald*.

³² Bahru Zewde, *The History of the Red Terror*, 27; Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 188; Gebru Tareke, *The History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, 47.

ids³³ while declaring that henceforth “we will avenge the blood of our comrades double- and triple-fold.” The revolution, he announced, “has advanced from the defensive to the offensive position”.³⁴ The crowd, whether cowed or mesmerised, responded in kind, chanting that “terror has passed from the revolutionary camp to the anti-revolutionary camp.”³⁵ The image of the Head of State spilling blood in front of 200.000 demonstrators has become one of the enduring icons of the Derg’s violence. Mengistu’s speech, however, ushered in the most decentralised and least state-controlled phase of the Ethiopian Terror, not the commonly assumed uniform state violence.

The decentralisation of the state’s means of violence in early 1977 grew out of new anti-insurgency practices instituted by the radical Derg. In March, the regime began to arm perceived supporters, organised into local *Abyot Tebeka* [“Revolution Defense”] squads. The arming of civilians was never completed - only 120 of Addis Ababa’s 297 *Kebele* Associations had been armed by July 1977³⁶ - but those *Kebeles* in which guns were distributed now possessed militias of about 20 armed men,³⁷ mandated to use violence in order to “demolish forces opposed to the revolution and the preservation of national unity”.³⁸ As in other conflicts, such incorporation of civilians into the counterinsurgency response, armed and relatively unbound by institutional controls, entailed a devolution and localisation of state violence.³⁹

³³ Bahru Zewde, *The History of the Red Terror*, 27.

³⁴ “PMAC Pledges Democratic Rights to Masses: Mammoth Rally Here Denounces Enemies of Unity, Revolution”, 5 February 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*.

³⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The History of the Red Terror*, 27.

³⁶ Abera Yemane Ab, *The Defeat*, 95.

³⁷ Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 241-2.

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

³⁹ See for example Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 216-7.

The radical Derg's first strategy against urban insurgents consisted in the arming of its supporters; the second concentrated on the disarming of its opponents. On 23 March, the Derg launched its first comprehensive *Asesa* ["search campaign"] in the capital. For four days, all roads were blocked to unauthorised traffic, as search teams consisting mainly of local *Abyot Tebeka* squads combed neighbourhoods for hidden opposition activists, weapons and propaganda material. The search claimed the lives of several prominent EPRP leaders,⁴⁰ but it failed to dismantle the party's organisational structure in the way an earlier search in Dase town had done.⁴¹ Instrumentalising local denunciations and giving *Kebele* actors license to carry out "revolutionary measures" with minimal supervision, the *Asesa* - which became a regular institution in revolutionary Ethiopia - markedly furthered the decentralisation of the state's means of violence.

A third counterinsurgency strategy adapted 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 rather loyalist - credentials was conducted at "government ministries, public utilities and all major organisations, [which were] required to 'cleanse' themselves by the exposure of 'reactionaries' within their midst."⁴² 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'."⁴³ Based on a logic of denunciation and a presumption of guilt, such sessions augmented the state's devolution of control over the exercise of its violence to local actors.

⁴⁰ Bahru Zewde, *The History of the Red Terror*, 27-8.

⁴¹ Abdu Muhammad, "A History of Dase Town, 1941-1991" (MA Thesis in History, Addis Ababa University, 1997), 84.

⁴² Addis Ababa Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 25 April 1978, FCO 31/2257-29, United Kingdom National Archives [hereafter UKNA]. The file contains a detailed description of such a session held at the National Theatre for the entire Ministry of Agriculture.

⁴³ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 192-3.

The introduction of these counterinsurgency strategies by the *Derg* and its civilian allies marginalised the courts and redefined notions of citizenship.⁴⁴ As Mengistu Haile Mariam himself declared in February 1977, “only those who are opposed to imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and who are genuine revolutionaries and patriots will have a place in socialist Ethiopia”.⁴⁵ Revolutionary violence was legitimised by a prior depersonalisation of its victims.

While revolutionary Ethiopia’s politics of exclusion was minted at the political centre, it was necessarily implemented by local actors on the ground. Here, it was readily localised into alternative conflicts or instrumentalised for personal agendas. The modes and extent of violence varied widely across urban Ethiopia, depending on the use local actors made of the violence-legitimatising revolutionary situation; widely, however, it tended towards the rise of “over-enthusiastic tyrants”.⁴⁶ With the impunity provided by the demise of the courts to those deemed “genuine revolutionaries and patriots”, highly local regimes of terror began to form. Among the most infamous was that established by Girma Kebede.

In the historiography of the Ethiopian Revolution, the figure of Girma Kebede has become the epitome of the brutal local despot. 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”.⁴⁷ His violence made him the prime example of the armed and centrally empowered *Kebele* leaders who “transformed themselves into ‘petty chiefs’ who looked on their neighbourhood as a fief.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ P. Brietzke, *Law, Development, and the Ethiopian Revolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1982), 186-99.

⁴⁵ “Chairman Addresses Graduates of 30th Batch of Guennet Military School”, 13 February 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*.

⁴⁶ Embassy Cable to EAD and FCO, 27 April 1978, FCO 31/2257-32, UKNA.

⁴⁷ የሰማንያ ቀን መታሰቢያ [“Memorial of the eighth day”], April 1977, ERTDRC 0015490, ERTDRC archive.

⁴⁸ Lefort, *An Heretical Revolution*, 241-2.

Girma Kebede was “a frustrated, short guy with huge complexes”,⁴⁹ who had been routinely bullied as a student at Tafari Mekonnen school.⁵⁰ Following the 1974 revolution, he 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 Addis Ababa’s 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 extended to him, establishing one of revolutionary Ethiopia’s most infamous local reigns of terror. Among his victims were not only regime opponents, but also personal foes like his old chemistry teacher, Mesfin Woldeab. Neither did Girma limit his operations to his own administrative area: where he suspected neighbouring *Kebeles* of apathy, he led his *Abyot Tebeka* squads to ensure that “revolutionary justice” was carried out. In these activities, Girma was encouraged by the Derg’s Legesse Asfaw - one of Mengistu’s closest confidants⁵¹ and in Dawit Wolde Giorgis’ view “the most dangerous man the revolution has brought to power”⁵² - who issued him with a Kalashnikov “for his personal protection”.⁵³

The operational context within which *Kebele* actors like Girma Kebede acted indicates that, contrary to subsequent *Derg* propaganda, localised reigns of violence in revolutionary Ethiopia need to be understood less as the products of proverbial “bad apples” and more as the aggregate result of local agency operating within organisational structures that legitimised and mandated violence. Based on a national security discourse and the depersonalisation of dissidents, the exercise of violence was justified and devolved to local actors.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Yeraswork Admassie, interviewed at Addis Ababa University, 26 September 2011.

⁵⁰ Kiflu Tadesse, interviewed by phone, 6 January 2012.

⁵¹ D. Day (British Embassy Addis Ababa) to A.G. Munro (EAD), 14 March 1978, FCO 31/2257-20, UKNA.

⁵² Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears*, 62.

⁵³ Abera Yemane Ab, *The Defeat*, 93.

⁵⁴ Compare the conclusions in Martha K. Huggins, Mika Haritos-Fatouros and Philip G. Zimbardo, *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and in David M. Anderson, “British Abuse and Torture in Kenya’s Counter-Insurgency, 1952-1960”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 23, 4-5 (2012), 700-719.

Girma Kebede soon outlived his usefulness and became an embarrassment to the regime. On 26 March 1977, Girma and his *Abyot Tebeka* squad brutally murdered nine employees of the Berhanena Selam Printing Press in public. Among the victims was heavily pregnant Daro Negash, a mother of eight who was also an outspoken trade union activist and clandestinely active in the EPRP's Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee.⁵⁵ The killings caused a public uproar.⁵⁶ Soon afterwards, Girma mistakenly arrested Mengistu Haile Mariam's uncle, Asrat Wolde, during a "mass-confession" session held for the Ministry of Education. Considered a liability, Girma Kebede was publicly executed on 2 April 1977.⁵⁷ The decentralised exercise of violence that had characterised Girma's terror, however, intensified further across urban Ethiopia.

On the eve of May Day 1977, Addis Ababa witnessed the most violent day in the history of the Ethiopian Terror. Hundreds of youths were killed that night⁵⁸ in "the largest mass execution of the revolution".⁵⁹ The massacres occurred after local demonstrations were met with the aggregate force of *Kebele* and military officials, prepared for the city-wide protests through information obtained in torture chambers. Following initial shootings, thousands of demonstrators were detained and executions continued throughout the night. In the massacres' aftermath, grieving parents were infamously charged by *Kebele* guards for the bullets that slew their children.

⁵⁵ Kiflu Tadesse, *The Generation Part II*, 23.

⁵⁶ Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123; Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 146.

⁵⁷ "Six Persons Executed for Dastardly, Inhuman Murder of 24 Persons", 3 April 1977, *Ethiopian Herald*.

⁵⁸ Precise numbers are impossible to ascertain, especially since many youths were driven outside the city for execution. According to Lefort, *An heretical revolution*, 201, the official death toll was 732, indicating a significantly higher figure. Rinehart estimates that 2000 youths were killed that night: Robert Rinehart, "National Security" in Harold D. Nelson and Irving Kaplan, eds., *Ethiopia: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: DA Pam, 1981).

⁵⁹ Ottaways, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 148.

The *Derg* rejected responsibility for the May Day massacres, instead blaming the demonstrating youths as well as *Meison*, thus heightening tensions with its ally. But its protestations were belied by the immediate unfolding, under its auspices, of the climax of decentralised Terror in urban Ethiopia: the *netsa ermeja* [“free measure”]. During this period, the *Derg* ceased to formally announce, explain or justify most of the “revolutionary measures” carried out in its name; the normalisation of revolutionary violence was complete. Like other revolutionary reigns of terror, the *netsa ermeja* was defined by summary justice, personified in soldiers or, more commonly, local *Kebele* officials, who “arrested the suspect, being judge, counsel, witness and executioner and all at one time.”⁶⁰

A significant but routinely ignored dimension of the *netsa ermeja*’s violent chaos was the widespread occurrence of sexual assault. Particularly in the makeshift *Kebele* prisons, sexual violence was a common feature of detention.⁶¹ Thousands of women were raped during this period, and threats to rape wives, daughters or other family members are reported to have been regularly employed in order to coerce collaboration or to break resistant detainees.⁶²

In stark contrast to the marked silence about sexual violence in the Terror’s memorialisation, the public display of dead bodies that became a defining feature of Ethiopia’s revolutionary violence during the *netsa ermeja* has been 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. 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 forbidden to retrieve the bodies of loved ones and - in a further, post-humous depersonalisation of the victim - even prohibited to mourn them in culturally appropriate ways. These practices were to outlast the *netsa ermeja*, continuing to define the

⁶⁰ Rosemary O’Kane, *The Revolutionary Reign of Terror: The Role of Violence in Political Change* (Brookfield: E. Elgar, 1991), 22.

⁶¹ Se Felekech Metaferia Woldehana: *Sparkle: The Protégée of Emperor Haile Selassie: Memories of My Ethiopian Girlhood* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2002), 246; Yibkaw Wolde Tsadik, interviewed at Radisson Blu Hotel, Addis Ababa, 10 March 2012.

⁶² Gebru Tareke, *The History of the Ethiopian Revolution*, 51.

Ethiopian Terror as it moved into a new phase of greater government control over the exercise of violence.

The decentralised violence that characterised the urban Terror for much of 1977 tore the social fabric apart, eroding trust and dividing communities. Suspicion and a widespread retreat from the public square ensued. But the logic of the Terror did not allow for an untouched private realm. With the onset of the Terror, private homes were subjected to raids and searches. Such raids often came in clusters and typically at night, violating the privacy and security of the home while asserting the unrestricted claims and reach of the state. Membere Tsion, a young resident of Addis Ababa during the Terror, 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.⁶³ Any sense of domestic safety was shattered as a result.

Similarly erosive of social trust, the localised Terror generated or exacerbated profound divisions at the family and household level. Several analysts of the Ethiopian Terror have sought to impose a class structure onto the political cleavage between competing political organisations;⁶⁴ others have attempted an ethnic analysis of the Terror, linking particular political organisations and ethnic groups together.⁶⁵ The strongest refutation of these projects, 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. Nigist Adane, a leading *Meison* and POMOA member who made a name for herself as the only one to openly challenge Mengistu Haile Mariam,⁶⁶ felt the need to shun her parental home due to her brothers' activism in the EPRP. The politically active Tito brothers provide a similar example: of the four brothers, three - Fikru, Aklilu and Tito - joined the EPRP. Aklilu and Tito acted as successive chairmen

⁶³ Anne Cassiers and Jean-Michel Bessette, *Mémoires Éthiopiennes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 481-5.

⁶⁴ For example Lefort, *An heretical revolution*, 202; compare Bahru Zewde, *The history of the Red Terror*, 29.

⁶⁵ For example Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶⁶ Negede Gobeze, interviewed via Skype, 13 December 2012.

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.⁶⁷ 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.

Such experiences were replicated in households across urban Ethiopia, scarred and divided by the decentralised and localised dynamics of the Terror. The re-assertion of state control over the Terror, with its attendant bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of violence, was to add a further layer to the disintegration of social ties and of state-society relations.

The Bureaucratisation of Collective Violence

In July 1977, the *Derg* began to reassert its control over the exercise of violence in the urban Terror. Its dependance on *Meison*, which had been the prime driver of local autonomy and empowerment, was loosened by the development of *Abyotawi Seded* ["Revolutionary Fire"], a regime-controlled party intended to take the place of the *Derg*'s civilian allies. At the same time, the impending Somali invasion cast the regime as the defender of national integrity, corroborating its centralising efforts. The gradual reassertion of government control over the urban Terror entailed a bureaucratisation of violence, whereby the exercise of "revolutionary measures" was rationalised, normalised and subjected to greater centralised supervision. This process came to define subsequent state-society relations in socialist Ethiopia, and cast a long shadow over urban Ethiopia beyond the demise of the *Derg*.

Remarkably, the gradual reassertion of government control over the urban Terror has received scarce attention in the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution. In his pioneering periodisation of the Terror years, Bahru Zewde sees the *netisa ermeja*, during which "terror

⁶⁷ Aklilu Kebede, interviewed in Silver Springs, MD, 20 August 2012; Gedion Wolde Amanuel, interviewed at Bole Medhane Alem, Addis Ababa, 19 March 2012.

had become democratized,”⁶⁸ as the final phase and culmination of the urban violence. He persists, however, in understanding the period exclusively in categories of political violence and state terror, and does not address the end of “democratised” violence in the re-assertion of regime control over the urban realm. Other scholars similarly disregard this transition, and hence ignore the *Derg*’s bureaucratisation of violence and its profound legacies.

Integral to the drive to centralise urban Ethiopia’s revolutionary violence was the imposition and enforcement of structures of supervision and accountability, which meant that even as the regime reduced its outward justifications of the Terror, its violence was internally being reported and documented in minute detail. The resultant archive of orders, reports and authorisations formed the basis of the Special Prosecutor’s “Red Terror Trials” in the 1990s and 2000s. Partly and hesitantly entrusted to the independent Ethiopian Red Terror Documentation and Research Center (ERTDRC)⁶⁹ before being retracted from public access by the Ethiopian Ministry of Justice, this archive reflects the tortuous transition from the decentralised autonomy of the *netisa ermeja* in mid-1977 to the near-complete government control of the urban Terror by mid-1978.

A report to the *Derg*’s “Public Security Committee”⁷⁰ from July 1977 illustrates the developing transition to greater government control over local violence as well as the process whereby the logic of depersonalisation and of revolutionary justice that had driven the earlier Terror was institutionalised. The document concerns two low-level EPRP activists, who had been apprehended at the *Kebele* level.⁷¹ Both youths - Shewatatek Moges Mekuria and Tesfaye Lulu Mengesha - were high school students who had joined the EPRP’s Youth League and confessed to involvement in menial operational tasks such as “acquiring red fabric, paper and other accessories for propaganda purposes” and “pamphlet distribution”. Both had suf-

⁶⁸ Bahru Zewde, *The History of the Red Terror*, 28.

⁶⁹ For the complex history of the ERTDRC and of its negotiations with the Ethiopian government, see Kissi, Edward, “Remembering Ethiopia’s ‘Red Terror’: History of a Private Effort to Preserve a Public Memory” in ERTDRC: *Documenting the Red Terror*.

⁷⁰ የሀገርና የሕዝብ ደህንነት ጥበቃ ጉዳይ, a branch of the *Derg*’s security apparatus.

⁷¹ ለቋሚ ኮሚቴ የሀገርና የሕዝብ ደህንነት ጥበቃ ጉዳይ ኃላፊ, [“To the secretary of the Public Security Committee’s Standing Committee”], July 1977, ERTDRC 00160100-3, ERTDRC archive.

fered bullet wounds while attempting to evade arrest, Shewatatek suffering a “badly mangled” left arm whereas Tesfaye was shot in the thigh. Upon their arrest, the young activists had been tortured, but unusually they had also received medical attention. Such care, their interrogators felt, was unjustifiable. Instead of “squandering valuable resources on a useless counter-revolutionary”, they recommended that “immediate revolutionary action” be taken. A hand-written note on the sidebar of the report - “take action” - indicates the fate of these young men.

In both cases, authorisation for the execution was given by a branch of the *Derg*’s centralised security apparatus. The report thus provides an early example of the increasingly common practice of reporting local dissenters and of violence against them being rationalised and centrally authorised, rather than being simply carried out by unaccountable local actors. By mid-1978, this process had come to define the concluding urban Terror.

In charge of directing and executing revolutionary violence, which increasingly represented a unitary terror under state control rather than a multitude of localised terrors, was the *Derg*’s sophisticated security apparatus. Consisting of a network of investigation departments linked to prisons and safe houses, it received important support from East German intelligence officers in late 1977.⁷² The structure of this security apparatus has been discussed in some detail in a publication by the Special Prosecutor’s Office⁷³ and need not be reproduced here. As the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the urban Terror progressed, its operational locus increasingly shifted to the prisons that had expanded in size and number during the early revolutionary period, and which came to define the experience of the Terror for thousands of Ethiopians. Writing in 1978, Katz observed that “there are jails all over Addis. [...] There are around 320 prisons [in the capital] alone, with capacities between twenty and several thousand. They are all filled.”⁷⁴ Amnesty International similarly contended that by the

⁷² Numerous files at the archives of the “Behörde des Bundesbeauftragten für die Stasi-Unterlagen” in Berlin shed new light on this cooperation; particularly relevant are MfS SdM 1089; MfS HVA VII; MfS Abt X no 91.

⁷³ Special Prosecutor’s Office, ጸጋዎ ያዘለ ደብ [“A Dossier Carrying Blood”] (Addis Ababa, 2010).

⁷⁴ Donald Katz: “Children’s Revolution: A Bloodbath in Ethiopia”, *Horn of Africa*, 1, 3. (1978), 3.

end of the Terror, Ethiopia had “turned into one big jail.”⁷⁵ These mass detentions climaxed as the *Derg* sought to establish control over the urban Terror, and coincide with its efforts to gradually remove the violence of the Terror from public view. The shift from overt to covert violence was a tortuous one, defined by overlap and reversal as much as by progression and change; as it closely mirrors the transition from decentralised to bureaucratised Terror, this shift is worth briefly considering in greater detail.

During the *netisa ermeja*, the public display of dead bodies had become an integral feature of Ethiopia’s revolutionary violence. Such open exhibitions of violence continued into early 1978, attracting particular attention following the official declaration of “Red Terror” by the *Derg* in November 1977. For the following months, an unprecedented theatre of violence dominated urban Ethiopian life. Large posters declaring *Key Shibir Yifafam* [“Let the Red Terror intensify”] were “posted at every likely and unlikely place, in bright and psychedelic eye-catching colours”.⁷⁶ Numerous eyewitnesses report that 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”.⁷⁷ This period of the official “Red Terror”, in which the *Derg* was exercising near-hegemonic control but still being occasionally challenged in urban areas, constituted the climax of state violence. The nature of this violence, however, was rapidly changing. By early 1978, public assassinations and the open display of dead bodies were giving way to nightly abductions and disappearances. The gunfire of executions could still be heard at night, but these were now being carried out in prison yards and in nearby forests rather than on the streets. The violence of the Ethiopian Terror took on a form of public secrecy, known and ever-present but removed from the public sphere. As in other instances of dirty war and state terror, this public secrecy combined with acts of selective violence, intruding into private spaces and thereby asserting the absolutist demands of the state

⁷⁵ Afr.25/04/79, June 1979, Amnesty International.

⁷⁶ Konjit Teklu, *Surviving the Red Terror: a fighting woman’s tale* (Washington, DC: ?, 1997), 6.

⁷⁷ Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123; John Cumbers, *Living with the Red Terror: Missionary Experiences in Communist Ethiopia* (Charlotte: Morris Publishers, 1996), 110.

and disrupting “the relations of protection, safety, trust and love”⁷⁸ in society. Such erosion of trust in social ties and in state-society relations came to constitute one of the defining legacies of Ethiopia’s Terror years.

The process of bureaucratising violence and of bringing the urban Terror under government control 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. State control over the urban Terror 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. Even as the regime was recentralising and bureaucratising the urban violence, local reigns of terror emerged, such as that led in Kebele 09 by Kelbessa Negewo and Samrat Mamo.⁷⁹ A zealot for the regime’s revolution, Kelbessa and his *Abyot Tebeka* devoted themselves to “weeding out anti-revolutionary elements” in their *Kebele* in the capital’s Gulele neighbourhood, long a stronghold of the EPRP.⁸⁰ Too autonomous for the resurgent *Derg*, Kelbessa was eventually purged, spending seven years in prison before finding asylum in the United States as a victim of political violence. That Kelbessa, like many other *Kebele* officials, was eventually held to account for his actions by the regime he was serving marks the transition towards totalitarian and monopolised state terror; it constituted a further step in the bureaucratisation and monopolisation of violence. In contrast to Girma Kebede, this was due neither to public pressure nor to falling out of favour with Mengistu; Kelbessa was removed from his position because he stood in the way of recentralisation. By April 1978, the *Derg* had founded a committee to investigate cases like Kelbessa’s when power had been abused for personal vendetta or local agendas under the guise of revolutionary rhetoric.⁸¹

⁷⁸ 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: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71.

⁷⁹ Kelbessa’s case attracted international attention when he was sued in a US court for his role in the Ethiopian Terror. Cf. *Abebe-Jira v. Negewo*, United States Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit, No. 93-9133.

⁸⁰ Andrew Rice, “The Long Interrogation”, *The New York Times*, 4 June 2006; this was also emphasised by Dawit Terefe, interviewed in London, 27 December 2011.

⁸¹ Tele from the Embassy in Addis Ababa, 27th of April 1978, FCO 31/2257-36, UKNA.

The transition from the public displays of violence in the official Red Terror to the largely covert state terror of 1978 was a gradual and tortuous process, but its advance contributed to the ebbing of the Ethiopian Terror. By March 1978, urban Ethiopia was firmly under regime control. The civilian opposition was in disarray, no longer able to mount a credible or even concerning challenge to the *Derg*. The public terror abated. Later in the year, open killings had become so rare that Amnesty International described Addis Ababa as one of Africa's safest cities.⁸² While torture and executions continued to be everyday realities in the prisons, the memory and the threat of violence now sufficed as foundations of *Derg* control over urban Ethiopia.

Conclusions

The resolution of the Terror marked the end of urban opposition to the *Derg*. The regime, which had been fragile and riven by internal divisions when the urban violence began, emerged from the Terror strengthened and with a firm grip on the state apparatus. But it was not only the regime that was transformed by the Terror; the Ethiopian state itself was similarly reshaped. The capacity of its revolutionary units of local administration, the *Kebeles*, were vastly expanded in order to respond to the urban challenges of the Terror years. Once brought under centralised supervision, these structures gave the Ethiopian state an exceptional degree of local knowledge and control. The state's capacity was further bolstered by the expansion of its security apparatus, developed with East German help. A new set of violent practices, including regular search campaigns, were institutionalised within this expanded security apparatus during the Terror. Many of these changes to the state were to outlive the *Derg* regime.

Ethiopia's urban society was similarly altered by the Terror. Exile, long despised in Ethiopian culture, now became a reality for thousands, generating one of Africa's largest di-

⁸² Halliday and Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*, 123.

asporas.⁸³ The political activism that had defined the early revolutionary years disappeared from Ethiopia's urban centres. Opposition relocated either to the new diasporas, or more efficiently to the rural areas, where it strengthened the ethno-nationalist insurgencies that ultimately overthrew the Derg. Urban citizens widely retreated from the public sphere, privatising their lives. The erosion of trust entailed by the Terror altered both social ties and state-society relations to lasting effect. Ethiopia was a profoundly different place in the wake of its revolutionary violence.

It is thus evident that the Ethiopian Terror marked a major turning point in the modern history of Ethiopia, altering the state, society, and relations between them. This important role, however, is not reflected in the Terror's historiography, which persists in treating urban Ethiopia's collective violence as a mere appendix to revolution. Through the modes of its violence, which penetrated every sphere of urban life and bequeathed the country with a more violent, more capable and more intrusive state, the Terror transformed urban Ethiopia. Its effects continue to reverberate to this day.

⁸³ Solomon Addis Getahun: *The History of Ethiopian Immigrants and Refugees in America, 1900-2000: Patterns of Migration, Survival and Adjustment* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishers, 2007).