



# Crimes and Mass Violence of the Russian Civil Wars (1918-1921)

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The revolutions of 1917 in the Russian Empire led to extremely violent civil wars in 1918. As in any civil war, it is particularly difficult to distinguish between military operations as such and "collateral" violence - to use this anachronistic term in the context of the events of those years: civilian massacres, hostage takings, deportations of populations collectively considered as "enemies." In these multiform conflicts, no single side had a monopoly over violence. It is nevertheless undeniable that the Bolsheviks theorized violence to a far greater extent as "mass terror," a central concept in Lenin's works. Lenin began developing this concept in 1905 when he explained that the proletariat and the poor farming communities should resort to "mass terror" when facing Czarist regime violence during the revolutionary events of 1905-1906. The call for "mass terror" reappeared shortly after the Bolsheviks took power in October 1917. At this time, the Bolsheviks, who were but a small minority in the country, encouraged all forms of social violence - violence on the part of soldiers deserting the decomposing Czarist army by the millions, violence of the peasant uprisings which broke out in the chaos of the autumn of 1917, violence of a displaced and famished urban proletariat. Most crucial to Lenin was succeeding to channel these different forms of violence under Party control in order to direct all violence at "class enemies," who were already being described as "enemies of the people" (Council of People's Commissars Decree, November 28, 1917). Far more than simply channeling social violence, "mass terror" spread and developed as a determined, theorized and asserted policy, without any inhibition whatsoever, as an act of regeneration of the entire social body. "Mass terror" then became the instrument of a social hygiene policy aimed to eliminate groups defined as "enemies" from the new society under construction. Indeed, from the very start, the new regime classified and categorized the population by distinguishing between friend and foe. "Friendly" groups were, by order of precedence, first the "real working proletariat," (an arbitrary concept to use in a country where an overwhelming majority of the some three million workers stemmed from rural peasantry), then farm laborers and poor peasants; enemies - the bourgeoisie, the landowners, popes and "kulaks," the latter being defined as "exploiting farmers," in a Marxist "class struggle" approach, which could not account for the complexities of a rural world that was largely ignored and despised for what was perceived as its "Asian backwardness" by the new Bolshevik power. It was all the less inhibiting to eliminate enemies condemned by the very evolution of History that Marxist scientism and the theory of "class struggle" allowed the Bolsheviks to understand. In Leninist discourse, these enemies were reduced to the state of "harmful insects," "lice," "vermin," "germs." Lenin wrote that it was necessary to relentlessly "purify," "clean" and "purge" Russian society of the "fleas," "bugs" and "parasites" infecting and polluting it (Lenin, *How to organize the emulation?*, December 1917). It is undeniable that such language paved the way for murder by dehumanizing the victims who, through rhetorical trickery, remained imminent and mortal threats despite already being condemned by History. "Mass terror" was supposed to bring about a new, regenerated and purified world according to Bolsheviks and, in particular, Chekists, agents of the Cheka (the Extraordinary Commission against counter-revolution, sabotage and speculation), the new regime's political police created on December 10, 1917. The following article (August 18, 1919) - among many other similar texts - published in the *Krasnyi Mech* (the Red Sword), the Kiev Cheka newspaper, strongly testifies to this: "We reject the old morality and humanity invented by the bourgeoisie in order to oppress and exploit the lower classes. Our morality does not have a precedent, our humanity is absolute because it rests on a new ideal: to destroy any form of oppression and violence. To us, everything is permitted because we are the very first to raise our swords not to oppress and enslave, but to release humanity from its chains... Blood? Let blood be shed! Only blood can dye the black flag of the pirate bourgeoisie, turning it once and for all into a red banner, flag of the Revolution. Only the old world's final demise will free us forever from the return of the jackals."

## **"Red Terror" (September-October 1918) \*\***

**1918; August 31-September 4:** In response to the double attack that took place on August 30, 1918

against Moisei Uritsky, head of the Petrograd Cheka, and against Vladimir Lenin in Moscow, approximately 1,300 bourgeois hostages held in Petrograd and Kronstadt prisons were massacred by Chekists.

**1918; September 5:** Decree of the Council of People's Commissars "On Red Terror" urging "the isolation of the Soviet Republic's class enemies in concentration camps and summary executions of any individual involved in White Guard organizations, insurrections or riots."

**1918; September-October:** Mass executions of bourgeois hostages in Moscow, Petrograd, Tver, Nijni-Novgorod, Viatka, Perm, Ivano-Voznessensk, Tula & etc. Estimated number of victims: 10,000 to 15,000 (Ejenedelnik VCK, September 22-October 27, 1918; Leggett, 1981). In a matter of weeks, the Cheka, the political police of the new regime, carried out two to three times as many executions as the Czarist regime had pronounced death sentences over a 92-year period from 1825 to 1917. Moreover, under the Czarist regime, death sentences were pronounced following legal procedures and later often commuted to forced labor sentences.

## **Summary executions of striking workers by the Cheka (Winter 1918-Spring 1919) \*\*\***

**Late 1918-early 1919:** Several major strikes (sometimes alongside mutinies of Red Army units) caused by declining living conditions and the arrests of Menshevik or Socialist-Revolutionary workers, were severely repressed by Cheka special units. The most violent repressions (massacres or executions of strikers) took place either in cities conquered over White or Socialist opponents (S-R and Mensheviks) where workers supported anti-Bolshevik forces (the Ural region) or in cities occupying strategic military positions when the strikes or the mutinies occurred (the Astrakhan region). Among the bloodiest and best documented episodes:

**1919; March 12-14:** Summary executions and drowning of striking workers and mutineers of the 45th Infantry Regiment in Astrakhan. At the beginning of March 1919, strikes broke out in Astrakhan for economic reasons (very low standards of rationing) as well as political reasons (arrests of non-Bolshevik Socialists), only to spread and degenerate into riots when the 45th I.R. refused to shoot at workers demonstrating in the town center. Mutineers joined strikers in raiding the Bolshevik party headquarters, killing several party officials. Serge Kirov, president of the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Astrakhan region, ordered "the merciless extermination of White Guard vermin by all means necessary." Cheka units crushed both the strike and the mutiny. Between March 12 and March 14, 2,000 to 4,000 strikers and mutineers were executed or drowned, thrown from barges in the middle of the Volga with stones attached to their necks. From March 15 on, repression struck the "bourgeois" who were accused of having "inspired the White Guard plot" of which the workers and soldiers had merely been the rank and file. Several hundred "bourgeois" were killed (Melgunov, 1927: 58-60; Silin in Chernov, 1922, p. 248-255).

**1919; March 17-18:** Summary executions at the Shlisselburg fortress of approximately 200 workers from the Petrograd Putilov factories following the great strike that broke out at the beginning of March in this "workers stronghold" of Petrograd. On March 10, the general assembly of Putilov workers had adopted a proclamation condemning the Bolshevik government and demanding free elections of the Soviets and factory committees, the elimination of limitations on quantities of food which workers were authorized to bring to Petrograd from the countryside (1.5 pood or 54 pounds) and the release of all "authentic revolutionary party" activists (Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries) held by the Cheka. When Lenin went to Shlisselburg in person on March 13, he was confronted by a hostile crowd shouting: "Down with the Jews, down with the Commissars!" On March 16, armed Cheka detachments stormed the Putilov

factories that were defended by workers who had taken up arms. 900 workers were arrested. During the following days, approximately 200 strikers were summarily executed (Brovkin, 1994: 69-72; Leggett, 1981: 313).

**1919; March 20-22:** Summary executions of about thirty workers in Tula where a strike had been crushed at the city arsenals. The strike in Tula had started because of declining living conditions and arrests carried out by the Cheka among Menshevik workers (Brovkin, 1994: 74-75).

## **"Decossackization:" 1st phase (February-March 1919) and 2nd phase (2nd semester 1920)\*\***

"Decossackization" - consisting in the elimination of the Don and Kuban Cossacks as a social group - was extremely significant within the revolutionary project and among Bolshevik practices. Indeed, for the first time, the new regime decided to take comprehensive measures of deportation and massacre in order to eliminate an entire population, considered collectively responsible, from a territory viewed by Bolshevik leaders as the "Soviet Vendée." "Decossackization" was not the result of military actions in the heat of battle. The process was spurred by a political decision emanating from Bolshevik party leaders. "Decossackization" was briefly interrupted by Bolshevik military setbacks in the spring of 1919, only to resume in 1920, when the Bolsheviks reconquered the Don and Kuban Cossack territories.

**1919; January 24:** Secret Resolution of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, calling for "mass terror against rich Cossacks, who should be exterminated and physically eliminated to the last."

**1919; February-March:** Mass massacres of "Cossack hostages" by regular troops of the Red Army during their progress in the Don region. Within a few weeks, 8,000 Cossacks were executed... (Brovkin, 1994: 103-105; Genis, 1994: 42-55; Holquist, 1997: 127-162).

In June 1920, Cheka leader Karl Lander was proclaimed "Plenipotentiary of the Kuban and the Don." He established the troiki, special tribunals in charge of "Decossackization," who sentenced several thousand Cossacks to death. The "hostage" system (members of Cossack families were declared outlaws) was extended to become a simple matter of bureaucracy and the "hostages" were confined to concentration camps, the largest one being Maykop (Brovkin, 1994: 128-129).

**1920; End of October-beginning November:** Five Cossack stanitsy (large boroughs) (Kalinovskaya, Ermolovskaya, Romanovskaya, Samachinskaya, Mikhailovskaya) were completely emptied of their inhabitants who were all deported to the Donets Basin to work in the mines as forced labor. Number of deported: around 17,000 (Werth in Courtois, Werth et al, 1997: 114-117).

## **"Red Terror" in the Ukraine (May-August 1918)\***

In the few months of 1918 during which the Red Army occupied the larger towns of the Ukraine (whilst the countryside mostly escaped Bolshevik stronghold), the precarious position of the Bolshevik power in the Ukraine called for repressive policies against the elite of the Old Regime who had not had time to flee. Tremendous "compensations from the bourgeoisie" were decreed: while waiting to receive payments, the Bolshevik authorities imprisoned great numbers of "bourgeois hostages," humiliating others (in Odessa, Kiev and Kharkov, "bourgeois women" were requisitioned to clean public latrines or military camps where rapes frequently took place). Many massacres and summary executions of "bourgeois hostages" occurred during the summer of 1919, in particular in the days before Bolshevik retreat in front of the White Army's progress. Among the most important:

**1919; June 8-11:** Mass executions of "bourgeois" in Kharkov prisons before the White Army gained control over the city (June 12, 1919). Estimated victim figure: 500 to 1,000.

**1919; June-August:** Mass executions of "bourgeois hostages" in Odessa. Estimated victim figure: approximately 2,000.

**1919; August:** Mass executions of "bourgeois hostages" in Kiev. Estimated victim figure: approximately 1,800 "bourgeois" were killed in the two weeks before the White Army took control over the city (August 28). During the Bolshevik occupation of the city (February-August 1919) a total of 3,000 people were killed (Brovkin, 1994: 119-126).

## **Pogroms in the Ukraine (1919-1921)\***

During the civil war, the Jewish populations of the Ukraine (and Belarus, to a lesser extent) were struck by the worst pogroms ever to take place in regions where the 1903-1906 pogroms had already severely harmed the Jewish populations. Approximately 150,000 Jewish victims (125,000 in the Ukraine, 25,000 in Belarus) died between 1918 and 1922. 1919 was undoubtedly the deadliest year. Pogroms were carried out by various armed units: by the White Army under General Denikin, by troops of the Ukrainian People's Republic under S. Petliura, by detachments of various warlord "Ataman" (Sokolovski, Kozyr-Zyrka, Hrigoriyv, Zelenyi), by detachments of "Greens" (insurgent farmers), and even by Red Army units (in particular the famous *Konarmya*, the 1st Cavalry Army under S. Budienny). In some townships of the Ukraine and Belarus different units would be simultaneously responsible for pogroms. Towns (Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav) were not spared, notably after their recapture by the Whites who systematically identified Jews as Bolsheviks following the "Judeo-Bolshevik" amalgam used by all pogrom perpetrators, regardless of their affiliation. Among the most important pogroms:

**1919; February 15-17:** Proskurov (Podolsk province): Massacres, rapes, looting by armed units of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Estimated number of victims: around 1,500

**1919; March 22-26:** Jitomir (Volhynia province): Massacres, rapes, looting by armed units of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Estimated number of victims: between 500 and 700.

**1919; May 11-12:** Gorodishe (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment.

**1919; May 13:** Tal'noie (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment.

**1919; May 12-14:** Uman' (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment. Estimated number of victims: between 800 and 1,200.

**1919; May 18-19:** Smela (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment.

**1919; May 15-20:** Elizavetgrad (province of Kiev): Massacres, rapes, looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment. Estimated number of victims: between 1,300 and 3,000.

**1919; May 26-28:** Trostyanets (province of Podolsk): Massacres and looting by local farmers and deserters ("Greens"). Estimated number of victims: 400.

**1919; June 15-18: Kharkov:** Massacres and looting after the town's recapture by units of Denikin's army. Estimated number of victims: between 800 and 2,500.

**1919; June 24:** Alexandria (province of Kherson): Massacres and looting by the Hrigoriyv Ataman detachment. Estimated number of victims: 300 to 700.

**1919; August 16-18:** Pogrebishe (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by the Zelenyi Ataman detachment. Estimated number of victims: 400 to 500.

**1919; September 2-8:** Fastov (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by White Army detachments. Estimated number of victims: 1,000 to 1,500.

**1919; September 28-29:** Smela (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by White Army detachments. Estimated number of victims: 112. 1919; December 14-15: Smela (province of Kiev): Massacres and looting by detachments of the 1st Cavalry Army (Red Army). Estimated number of victims: 107 (Heifetz, 1922; Miliakova, Rozenblat & Elenskaia, eds, 2006).

## **White Terror in the oriental regions (Ural, Siberia) under control of admiral Kolchak (end 1918-mid 1919)\***

Compared to the Red Terror, White Terror was never established as a system. Mostly uncontrolled and perpetrated by "warlords" such as the Cossack Atamans Semenov or Annenkov, White Terror nevertheless targeted specific groups: Socialist militants, suspected Bolshevik sympathizers, Jews (assimilated to Bolsheviks), in legacy with Old Czarist regime discriminatory repressions. As was also often the case under the Red Terror, the greatest massacres of opponents and civilian "enemies" were perpetrated just before abandoning a town or position. Among the most important massacres:

**1918; December 25-26:** Massacre of several hundred socialist militants and workers imprisoned at Omsk by units of General I.N. Krasilnikov (Admiral Kolchak's Army).

**1919; Mid-April:** Massacre of 670 prisoners (militant Socialist-Revolutionaries, workers) incarcerated in Ufa.

**1919; May:** Massacre of 350 prisoners incarcerated in Chita.

**1919; July 10-14:** Pogrom in Yekaterinburg. Approximately 2,200 victims, mostly Jewish (Brovkin, 1994: 205-206; Melgunov, 1923: 78-90).

## **Civilian mass executions by the Bolsheviks in Crimea (mid-November-end-December 1920)\***

With the exception of the pogroms perpetrated in 1919-1921 in the Ukraine and Belarus by most diverse armed units, civilian massacres reached their apogee in Crimea during the evacuation of the White Army's last units. In a matter of weeks (from mid-November to the end of December 1920), approximately 50,000 persons were shot or hung, the majority civilians, often belonging to the social elite, who had followed the White Army's retreat to the Crimean peninsula. Firstly (from mid-November to the beginning of December), massacres of civilians who had not embarked with the troops being evacuated, "spontaneously"

multiplied. Secondly, the Bolshevik authorities began registering the population of the main Crimean towns as accurately as possible, given the circumstances. Each inhabitant had to register with the local Cheka by completing a lengthy investigative questionnaire. On the basis of this "investigation" the population was classified in three categories: to be shot, to be sent to concentration camp, to be spared (Brovkin, 1994: 346-349; Melgunov, 1924: 187-202).

## **Mass executions of hostages and incarceration of civilian population in concentration camps following the repression of the Tambov Province farmer uprising (Summer 1921)\*\*\***

Of all peasant uprisings provoked by massive political requisitions of agricultural products, the Tambov uprising was the longest, the most important and the best organized. To defeat this insurrection, General Tukhachevski, nominated by the Politburo as the "Commander in chief of the liquidation campaign of the Tambov province bandits," resorted to downright political terror by combining hostage taking, mass execution, internment of tens of thousands of civilians in concentration camps, use of asphyxiating gas, deportation of entire villages suspected of helping or harboring the "bandits." In particular:

**1921; June 11:** Order no 171 from Tukhachevski planning to "shoot on the spot, without judgment, any citizen refusing to give his name," to "shoot hostages in villages where arms are hidden," to "shoot on the spot without judgment the eldest son of bandit families."

**1921; June 12:** Order from Tukhachevski to "clear the forests, where the bandits hide, with asphyxiating gas."

**1921; July:** Opening of 7 concentration camps in the Tambov province for internment of "families of insurgent bandits." By the end of July 1921, these camps detained approximately 50,000 prisoners, the majority women, elderly and children. Typhus, Cholera and famine took their toll. In the autumn of 1921, mortality had reached 15 to 20% per month (Danilov & Shanin, 1994).

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