

# The Role of Ideology in Revolutionary Terror: Comparisons of the French, Russian and Ethiopian Experiences

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**Abstract:** *Events unfolded during the French Revolution immensely impacted on the ensuing political struggles across the globe. The Terror which took place in Russia and Ethiopia following the 1917 and 1974 Revolutions respectively were among the classic instances. This paper, therefore, attempts to encapsulate how ideology played a pivotal role in the 'Revolutionary Terror' orchestrated by the Jacobins in France, the Bolsheviks in Russia and by the Ethiopian Revolutionary forces. But one of the specific features of the Russian Revolution was the recurrent and extensive use of Terror. Yet among the waves of Terror unfolded in Russia, the first one (1918-21) is a classical revolutionary Terror akin to that of the Jacobins. Likewise the Terror that occurred in Ethiopia ostensibly from 1976 to 1978 under the leadership of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam is also akin to this wave of the Bolsheviks Terror. Hence, as indicated hereinabove, the paper compares the three revolutionary Terrors based on the roles of ideology as idiosyncrasy from which terror emanated.*

**Keywords:** Revolutionary Terror, Ideology, France, Russia, Ethiopia

## 1. Ideological Basis of the Terror

*Although "the Terror" can be defined in many ways, here it refers above all to state policy during the period 1793–1794[in the case of France] that used institutionalized violence and the threat of violence— primarily executions— both to punish and intimidate the purported enemies of the nation ( Tacket : 2015:3)*

*Granted that ideology is more of a justification than a drive, the Ethiopian case illustrates how conflicts between mutually exclusive elites favor the path of political outbidding mobilizing utopian projects so as to galvanize the support of the masses. ( Mesay: 2011)*

It is apparent that ideology was one of the prime factors behind the unfolding of the classical revolutionary terror. One of the authorities on the history of the Ethiopian Revolution, Gebru Tareke, for instance, maintains that in countries where 'revolutionary terror' unfolded, it is attributed to three causes ,namely, 'ideology, historical contingency, and desire for power' (Gebru: 41). Hence, in this paper, we shall succinctly disentangle how ideology was employed by revolutionaries in all three cases to justify their actions during their respective instances of terror.

Scholars like Bouloiseau maintains that born of 'the passion of being right', ideology comprises a set of images and concepts, instrument of persuasion, and an emotional driving force , for it aims at compelling and leading to action. The milieu of struggle nurtured by ideology must provide both reasons for living and reasons for dying. The content of ideology is said to have been manifold, namely, spiritual and concrete, personal and collective. By alluring to all these motivations, the Jacobins of France succeeded in creating an amalgam whose roots go back to Roman history and enlightenment (Bouloiseau: 30-31).

It seems that the Jacobins of France were the first Revolutionaries who carried out Revolutionary Terror that had far reaching repercussions. Scholars do not agree on the factors that precipitated the Jacobins Terror (1793-94). For instance, Skocpol essentially accepts the interpretation which sees the outbreak of the international war as a crucial factor leading to the Terror (Skocpol: 185-193; Maurois: 313). Similarly Roger Price argues that the Jacobins were forced to carry out the Terror due to the outbreak of the rebellion within France, renewed external threat and invasion and the need to enforce law of the maximum( Price: 117-118). Yet again, according to Sewell, others have treated ideology as either instrumental terms as an arm of factional struggle – or as a reflection of actors class positions (Sewell: 183-84). However, Furet refutes the above interpretations. Instead he sees the Terror as developing inevitably out of the ideology of the revolution. The revolutionaries had borrowed from Rousseau a highly abstract notion of 'popular sovereignty' which insisted on the unity of the 'general will' (Furet: 61-63). In line with this Tacket argues that the patriots of the French Revolution 'naively adopted a utopian plan to remake society from top to bottom on the basis of reason' (Tacket: 2)

It is argued that if a united 'popular will' did not always manifest itself clearly in the cacophony of revolutionary debate, this was not because of real disunity, but because of the view and deceptions of the people's enemies, who wished to restore the old regime by treachery. Given the primacy of this abstract notion of the united People's will, dissent was understood not as a normal fact of political life, but as a plot , a symptom of treachery against the people and the Revolution and dissidents had to be purged to uphold the virtue – indeed the very existence - of the revolutionary state. Therefore, according to Furet, the Terror was generated by a continuing dialect between the notion of general will and the aristocratic plot, and was implicit in the revolutionary ideology from the beginning (Furet: 63). Sewell also concludes, although the Terror developed through the 'circumstances' of the war and attending

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political struggle, its dynamic was essentially internal and ideological (Sewell: 183-84).

Furet even goes to some length, for instance, to argue that Robespierre's personal characteristics were extraneous to his role in the revolution. Robespierre was a dominant figure not because he was the 'incorruptible', nor because of his exceptional political talents, but because he succeeded in "becoming an embodiment" of revolutionary ideology (Furet: 56). Revolutionary ideology itself, not Robespierre, was the significant historical actor. It is said, "The Revolution would speak through him...he was the mouth pieces of its purest and most tragic discourse" (Ibid).

Sewell elaborates vividly how ideology played its own role in the radicalization and apparently eruption of the Terror in France by summarizing the philosophy of the then existing political clubs/organizations. For the Feuillants, Constitutional monarchists, the distinction between the 'aristocracy' and the 'people' was above all legal; aristocrats were those who had privilege that separated them from the common people and the common law. In Girondin and Jacobin discourse the distinction became increasingly political: aristocrats were those who opposed the Revolution, or those who opposed the radicalization of the Revolution. The Sans-culottes while accepting the Jacobins and Girondin's views, added important nuances of their own: "aristocracy" was also the rich who lived better than them and cared more about their gold than about the republic; or wore breeches instead of the baggy trousers of the common people. Sans-culottes were radical republicans who, to signify that they were manual workers, wore baggy trousers rather than knee breeches of the pre-Revolutionary aristocrats (Paxton: 177). Moreover, for the Sans-Culottes, the 'aristocratic plot' was also responsible for the high prices of food stuffs. Aristocrats were systematically withholding grain from market in order to starve out the patriotic Sans-culottes and reduce them to slavery (Sewell: 185-186).

It was in alliance with the Sans-Culottes that the Jacobins came to power and the regime that they established is termed as Revolutionary Government. Robespierre explained it as follows:

*Its [Revolutionary Government's] principles were not to be sought in the works of Political writers, but in the laws of necessity and of the welfare of the people ...The Revolution...was a state war, in which the literal execution of the constitutional principles was not to be looked for, and in which government had to exercise an extraordinary activity and an authority that was not required in normal times.*

(Cited in Cobban: 61; See also Crane Brinton: 117-18) who argues that it was a peculiar regime needed to safeguard the Revolution from its adversaries.

Moreover, Robespierre also justified the Terror as follows:

*..... in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies with terror. If the spring of popular government in time of*

*peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue... Break the enemies of liberty with terror, and you will be justified as founders of the Republic. The government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny (Cited in Hunt: 46-47).*

Hence, the Terror was an emancipation of virtue for Robespierre and other radicals because they believed that it was indispensable for the security of the new republic. It was not conceived as the arbiter of conflicting interests, but rather as a mechanism for ensuring that individual will were forged into one, single, general or national will (ibid).

Sewell argues that the French Revolution was an ideological event of the first magnitude. If anything, its ideological outcomes were even more important than its class or state building outcomes (Sewell: 194).

As to the Russian Bolshevik Terror, sources indicate that the Bolsheviks leaders resort to Revolutionary Terror is often explained by the constant reference by the Russian leaders to the experience of the French Revolution, i.e., to the Jacobins Terror ( Charles: 286, 291; Shtepa: 75) . Among the Bolshevik leaders, Lenin greatly admired the Jacobins. And even Marx, the German philosopher, by whose philosophy many of the Bolshevik leaders were influenced, blamed the communards in 1871 for not having used terrorist methods in the way Jacobins had done. Thus, Marxists and Leninists believed that Revolutionary Terror was the inevitable concomitant of a dictatorship. It seemed that they were adamant that it was inconceivable to have a dictatorship of the proletariat without it (ibid).

Even before the Bolsheviks takeover Trotsky, one of the ideologues of the Revolution, quoted as saying, "the great bourgeois revolution of France 125 years ago made their revolution great by means of the terror" (Silverlight,: 64). Immediately after the Bolsheviks came to power Trotsky warned the members of the party saying, "We shall not enter into the kingdom of Socialism in white gloves on a polished floor" (cited in ibid). Moreover, on 14 December 1917, after the suppression of the Cadet (Liberal) party, Trotsky told his opponents in the Soviet Central Committee: "You protest against the mild terror which we are directing against our class enemies. But you should know that no later than a month from now the terror will assume the very violent forms after the example of the great French revolutionaries. The guillotine will be ready for our enemies and not merely the jail" (ibid).

According to Chamberlain, the theoretical justification of the Red Terror was that the soviet regime could not survive without it (Chamberlin: 76-77), as we have seen above also considered it indispensable for the survival of the Revolutionary Government. For instance, inaugurating the Red Terror, Pravda, the party's organ had decreed: "workers, the time had come when either you must destroy the bourgeoisie, or it will destroy you" (cited in Legett: 113-14).

As to the ethical background to carry out the Terror the Bolsheviks leaders, especially Lenin, justified by underling that in doing so they attempted to replace generally accepted form of morality by a special class morality or “revolutionary conscience” (ibid: 224). Lenin wrote, “We deny any kind of morality which is not a class morality” (ibid).

Lenin further elaborates the meaning of class or the so-called Communist morality:

*For us there do not, and cannot, exist the old system of morality and ‘humanity’ invented by the bourgeoisie for the purpose of oppressing and exploiting the ‘lower classes’. Our morality is new; our humanity is absolute, for it rests on the bright ideal of destroying all oppression and coercion. To us all is permitted, for we are the first in the world to raise the sword not in the name of enslaving and oppressing anyone, but in the name of freeing all from bondage (cited in ibid).*

One of the specific features of the Russian revolution was the recurrent and extensive use of terror. According to Krjeci, one can identify five particular waves of terror or intensified repression of whole groups of population after the Bolsheviks seized power (Krejci: 124-25). The first wave was initiated by Lenin in 1918 and continued up to 1921. This may be described as a classic revolutionary terror, reminiscent of that of the Jacobins in the French revolution as we have seen above (ibid: 124).

Other waves of the terror took place during the reign of Joseph Stalin and are commonly known as Stalin’s Purge. O’Connor contends, one can distinguish between ‘purge; and ‘terror’ and it is possible to argue that the former is a permanent and necessary element in a totalitarian, one party state. The purge performs some of the activities carried out by the ‘ballot box’ and the ‘cabinet shuffle’ in a democracy. It provides a mechanism for the replacement of those judged inefficient, unenthusiastic, or unfounded in the faith, and for the removal of the political and personal opponents of the dominant group. The Purge can be bloodless as in the 1920s (O’Connor: 53).

The well known authority on the Stalin’s purge, Conquest, contends that Stalin’s terror is not comparable with the Terror of the French Revolution. And the frightful slaughter of the thirties was not, like the Terror of Lenin and Robespierre, launched in time of crisis, of revolution and war. It was not even done –like Stalin’s own liquidation of the Kulaks in the 1920s and early 1930s- for misconceived but at any rate debatable economic ends. On the contrary, it was launched in the ‘coldest of cold blood’, when Russia had at last reached a comparatively calm and even moderately prosperous conditions (Conquest, 1973: 4). Similarly Skocpol argues that the “Great Purges” of the 1930s symbolizes the most far-reaching historical occurrence of the utilization of terror in peace time by part of society’s domestic elite against other parts (Skocpol: 23).

Conquest further indicates that it would doubtless be false to argue that it followed inevitably from the nature of the Soviet Society and of the communist party. It was itself a

means of enforcing violent change upon that society and that party. But all the same, it could not have been launched except against the extraordinary idiosyncratic background of Bolshevik rule (Conquest: 19). In this regard, Hosking argues that Stalin’s ideology was formed directly out of Leninism, but selectively, taking those aspects of Leninism which remained expedient and reforging them in a new, cruder and more monolithic form (Hosking, 1990: 216)

Meanwhile, in the case of Ethiopia sources indicate that the military junta that came to power rationalized its version of Terror by quoting the Russian Revolution where similar measures had been taken (Dawit: 90-91). Babile, for instance, contends that by labeling its Terror “Red” and that of its opponents” white” it was consciously passing a message across by referring to the Bolsheviks experience and equating itself with the force of the revolution there. By this account, its enemies then emerged in the media as Denkins, Kolchaks, the white guards, etc (Babile: 68-69).

In this regard the notes on the back cover of the acclaimed book of Mesay Kebede encapsulates the fact that Ideology and Elite Conflicts provides a theoretical explanation of the major outcomes of Ethiopia’s social revolution. He comprehensively discusses that the existing theories of revolution shed light on the eruption of a radical revolution in Ethiopia and, most of all how they accommodate the major anomaly of a socialist revolution being executed by a military committee that radicalized after the removal of the imperial regime,”( Mesay: 2011) .

Andargachew maintains that both the major civilian left organization and Mengistu’s coalition were adamant on the fact that they were in the business of perpetrating terror against each other, however, they both claimed their own form of Terror was ‘Red’ and that of the other side was ‘white’ (Andargachew Tiruneh: 213). This is because the Terror that was carried out by the Bolsheviks from 1918 to 1920 is known as the ‘Red Terror’. On the Other hand, the Terror orchestrated by anti- Bolshevik forces is termed as ‘White Terror’. The Whites shared little in common but their opposition to the Bolsheviks and ranged in political outlook from Socialist SRs and Mensheviks to Monarchists ( Khort: 113-14). Hence, it is naive to believe that a revolutionary movement or force could identify itself with the whites.

It was in the *Seded*( Seded, Vol. 1 No. 9 Hamle 13, 1969 EC( July, 1977): 1-3) , the organ of *Abyotawi Seded*( Revolutionary Falame), founded by Mengistu Haile Mariam’s faction that the reasons why the PMAC used the Bolsheviks as model is elaborated in detail. It quoted the speech made by Lenin in 1919 (*Lenin’s Selected Works*, Vol.3: 185) and substantiated that the speech was also relevant in the case of Ethiopia because:

*Both countries besieged by enemies at a time when the Revolution of the oppressed masses erupted; Russia’s encirclement was attempted at strengthening internal counter revolutionaries and in doing so to reinstate the exploitative old regime and the same was true in the case of Ethiopia; Russia’s encirclement was supported by internal counter revolutionaries like Kolchak, Denkin, etc while Ethiopia’s encirclement was supported by the EPRP, EDU,*





repeated what the Bolsheviks accomplished in practice but also what they said.

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