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# **The Sacralization of Violence: Bolshevik Justifications for Violence and Terror during the Civil War**

**James Ryan**

“When we approach an enemy, to kill him, we kill him not because he’s an evil person, but because we make use of the instrument of terror in order to create fear for others.”<sup>1</sup>

Feliks Dzerzhinskii, 1920

Recent scholarship on Soviet state violence has drawn attention to the distinction between violence as “terror” and violence as a “purge” of the body politic. The former refers to violence that is designed to communicate a message to a wider audience and ensure submission to state power. The purpose of the latter is not to terrify or educate the wider populace about political enemies, but is rather the “forcible removal of specific segments of the population and the isolation or elimination of these groups.”<sup>2</sup> In particular, scholars have questioned the application of the term “Great Terror” to the violence of the late 1930s,<sup>3</sup> and to the several violent police “mass

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<sup>1</sup> V. Vinogradov and N. Peremyshlennikova, eds., *Arkhiv VChK: sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 2007), 145.

<sup>2</sup> See David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses. Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939*, (Ithaca and London, 2011), 239.

<sup>3</sup> See especially David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism. Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924-1953* (New Haven, CN, and London, 2009), 286; see also Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police. Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Washington, DC and Baltimore, MD, 2009), and S.A. Papkov, *Stalinskii terror v Sibiri, 1928-1941* (Novosibirsk, 1997), 3-4.

operations” of 1937-8 (NKVD Order 00447 directed against “former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements,” and the “national operations” against suspect ethnic groups carried out at the same time) that account for the vast bulk of executions and arrests of that time. Those “mass operations” cannot be separated neatly from the general process of arrests of party members and workers, and they contributed to the creation of a state of fear for many.<sup>4</sup> However, the purpose was to excise from Soviet society, as secretly as possible, certain population “contingents” perceived to be inherently harmful as war appeared imminent, and to create a purified, aesthetic socialist community.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty years earlier the political police, the Vecheka (or Cheka), had also been charged with implementing a campaign of mass violence, but this assumed a somewhat different form. The Red Terror of late 1918 was officially and widely proclaimed, and its purpose was indeed to terrify and to educate as well as to excise through execution or confinement to concentration camps harmful elements believed to be irreconcilable to the new Soviet order. Lists of persons executed were published in the main daily newspapers, along with forthright justifications for the Terror. In addition, the Vecheka decided that it was necessary to publish its own journal, both for its employees and for the public, and thus from late September six editions of the *Vecheka Weekly* (*Ezhenedel'nik VChK*) appeared. This short-lived publication was, as one historian has recently put it, an “extraordinary monument to the Terror,”<sup>6</sup> providing a fascinating insight into the function of violence as a means of constituting the early Soviet state. It has not, however, attracted much

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<sup>4</sup> On the social dimensions of Stalinist repressions, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Holquist, “State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism,” in *Landscaping the Human Garden. Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner, (Stanford, CA, 2003), 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> Scott B. Smith, *Captives of Revolution. The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik Dictatorship, 1918-1923* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2011), 86.

attention from scholars. Moreover, the significance of the state violence of the earliest years of Soviet power in the context of the violence of the inter-war period as a whole has not been adequately explored.<sup>7</sup>

This article examines some of the principal themes associated with the intellectual history of early Soviet state violence, focusing especially on the period of the Red Terror. It discusses the rhetorical strategies employed by the party and political police to legitimize and justify (and thereby enable) the violence of the Soviet state, up to the point of purifying such violence and rendering it sacred. In doing so it opens up discussion on the nature of the ideology of Leninism, and it considers the question whether Leninism might usefully be considered a “political religion.” The nature of this ideology, and the strongly moralistic, indeed “hypermoral” outlook of the Bolsheviks, were of crucial importance for the development and justification of Soviet state violence.<sup>8</sup>

Bolshevik ideology combined Enlightenment rationalism with secular messianism. It was fundamentally motivated by its vision of historical eschatology: the transformation of the working people from the “darkness” of capitalism to “salvation” from suffering and exploitation in a classless society. Its purpose, as Igal Halfin has put it, was “to abolish politics, and to open a new, conflict-free, transparent page in the story of human existence.”<sup>9</sup> However, as several scholars have stressed in the last decade and more, the means utilized by the Soviet state should be situated

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<sup>7</sup> In relation to my own recent monograph on Lenin and violence (James Ryan, *Lenin's Terror. The Ideological Origins of Early Soviet State Violence* [London and New York, 2012]), this article is based on a broader source base, and it provides a more in-depth and theoretically-informed examination of violence in Bolshevik thought.

<sup>8</sup> For the Bolsheviks as “hypermoral,” see Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions. Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2009), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2000), 1-9.

beyond ideology and within the framework of modern European state practices, especially during the First World War,<sup>10</sup> and indeed early modern techniques of state-building regarding the extraction of resources from the peasantry.<sup>11</sup> Besides, its ideology was not merely Marxist but was influenced by and drew from several intellectual strands, including its context of genesis in autocratic late imperial Russia. David Hoffmann has argued recently that it is more accurate to understand Soviet state violence as the result of practices of state violence already established and subsequently “ideologized,” rather than as originating from ideology.<sup>12</sup> I understand this equation with a difference in emphasis, with ideology more centrally important and modern state practices harnessed to these ideological ends in the context of various economic and military/political crises,<sup>13</sup> although my focus is on elite discourse.

In addition to the central focus on the relationship between violence and the Bolshevik conception of the sacred, this article explores other aspects of Bolshevik discourse around violence and repression during the Civil War years (1918-20), especially during the first year of Soviet power. The article’s focus is upon the “external,” publicly consumable language, but this language did not usually conceal a very different “internal” discourse.<sup>14</sup> This was a time of ideological flux

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<sup>10</sup> See especially Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), and Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*.

<sup>11</sup> See Tracy McDonald (referring here to Charles Tilly), *Face to the Village. The Riazan Countryside Under Soviet Rule, 1921-1930* (Toronto, 2011), 301.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*, 257-8.

<sup>13</sup> Other recent works that stress the centrality of ideology in the Soviet system include David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven and London, 2011), and Amir Weiner, “Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no.4 (1999), 1114-55.

<sup>14</sup> See here Donald Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War. Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2002), 44.

as theory met practice and general visions met concrete realities, and the ruling party was by no means monolithic in outlook. Publicly-aired debates were frequent, often furious, demonstrating the difficulty of distinguishing clearly the nature of public and private Bolshevik political discourse. Perhaps none was more significant in 1918, after the signing of the peace treaty with Germany, than the debates that flared up during the Red Terror between supporters and opponents of Cheka methods. Ultimately, the role of the political police and the instrument of “terror” as distinct from “revolutionary justice” were safeguarded by Lenin and the party leadership. However, discussions within the Soviet Justice Commissariat regarding criminological theory and penal practice offer some alternative and no less intriguing insights into the Soviet approach to repression. Taken together, these issues would be of fundamental importance for the development of the Soviet state for the next twenty years and beyond.

#### The Red Terror: “Reading all about it”

From the very outset of their revolution, the Bolsheviks faced armed opposition from their opponents of varying political hue, and by the summer of 1918 they were faced with full-scale frontal civil war and widespread peasant revolts. The repressive actions of the Bolshevik state intensified as a result, as did the rhetoric of terror.<sup>15</sup> The assassination of Moisei Uritskii, the head of the Petrograd Cheka, and an attempt on Lenin’s life on the same day, August 30, led to the official declaration of Red Terror on September 5. Concentration camps were to be used to isolate class enemies, and all persons concerned in any way with “whiteguard organizations, conspiracies or uprisings” were to be shot. The victims of such measures were to be named in the press.<sup>16</sup> The tone was set the day after the terrorist attacks, with the party’s central newspaper, *Pravda*,

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<sup>15</sup> See Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror*, and Il’ia S. Rat’kovskii, *Krasnyi terror i deiatel’nost’ VChK v 1918 gody* (St. Petersburg, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> G.A. Belov et al, eds, *Iz istorii VChK 1917-1921 gg: sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1958), No.155, 182-3.

announcing that “The class murderer, the bourgeoisie, must be crushed.”<sup>17</sup> The decree establishing the Terror identified the *Vecheka* as the institution to which primary responsibility for conducting this campaign of violence would devolve. The decision to entrust the operation of the Terror to the Chekas’ three- and five-person boards rather than the specially-created courts for counter-revolution, the Revolutionary Tribunals, signified, as Matthew Rendle has noted, the triumph of “revolutionary terror over revolutionary justice.”<sup>18</sup>

Scott Smith has described the Red Terror as having served, through its accompanying rhetoric and publicity, as “ideological performance.” That is, it provided “bodily form to the concept of the White Terror, entangled SRs and bourgeois as co-conspirators in it, and masked the true nature of resistance to Bolshevik power.”<sup>19</sup> The Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) were the Bolsheviks’ principal socialist rivals for power in Soviet Russia, and were implicated in the terrorist attacks of August 30. The purpose of the concept of White Terror, as Smith explains, was to link all opposition to the Bolsheviks to the same source - international capital - and thereby to publicly discredit the SRs. The opening article of the *Vecheka Weekly* stated as one of the journal’s aims to demonstrate to workers and poor peasants who their class-political enemies were, how cunning these enemies were, and to impress upon them the impossibility of a third option between proletarian and bourgeois dictatorships. In this way, the “treachery” of the Mensheviks and SRs would be exposed.<sup>20</sup> The Bolsheviks were attempting to monopolize revolutionary discourse in

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<sup>17</sup> *Pravda*, 31 August 1918, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Rendle, “Revolutionary Tribunals and the Origins of Terror in Early Soviet Russia,” *Historical Research* 84, no.226 (2011): 693-721.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Captives of Revolution*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.1, September 22, 1918, in V.K. Vinogradov (ed.), *VChK upolnomochena soobshchit’...* (Moscow, 2004), 53. Subsequent references are to this book.

order to “make literal the trope of class war” and discredit the more moderate political orientations of the Mensheviks and SRs.<sup>21</sup>

In doing this, the Bolsheviks were acting with political cynicism, or “ideological dissimulation,” but also with genuine conviction regarding the objective alignment of forces in the international class struggle.<sup>22</sup> The slogan of political absolutism, that there could be “no middle course” between the absolute power of the Bolsheviks and counter-revolutionary restoration in Russia, became an essential tenet of the Bolshevik mind-set during the Civil War.<sup>23</sup> Revolution - as Lenin had been insisting since 1905 - was war,<sup>24</sup> and the Civil War context reinforced this conviction. For the Bolshevik leadership, there appeared to be no essential difference between the repressive reality for the masses in autocratic tsarist Russia and the democracies of Britain and America. In those democracies, the “horrible oppression of capital” kept the workers in “slave chains,” with outright violence against the people once they voiced their demands.<sup>25</sup> Bolshevik reasoning here was that “violence” was the reality of any state system, whether the more subtle, “ideological” type practiced by democracies in peacetime to keep the masses in oppression, or the open, bloody violence of civil war.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the party provided an important source of legitimacy for its methods of rule: its detractors were hypocrites, or at best misguided, and the

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Captives of Revolution*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Such absolutism was not uniquely Bolshevik during the Civil War. See Mikhail V. Krivenko, “Massoviyi terror v Rossii i na Uge Gosudarstva v 1918-1920gg: Istoki, Mekhanizmyi, Posledstviia,” (Ph.D diss., Piatigorsk, 2007), 64.

<sup>24</sup> See James Ryan, “‘Revolution is War’: The Development of the Thought of V.I. Lenin on Violence, 1899-1907,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 89, no.2 (2011): 248-73.

<sup>25</sup> S. Nikol'skii, “Myi i oni,” *Ezhenedel'nik VChK*, No.2, September 29, 1918, 95, and Mgeladze, “Vne zakona,” *Pravda*, November 22, 1918, 1.

<sup>26</sup> See “‘Skrytaia” grazhdanskaia voina perekhodit v ‘otkryituyu,’” *Severnaia Kommuna*, 23 September 1918 (evening edition), 1.



methods of the Bolsheviks were really no worse than those of any other state, but of course in the service of a just cause.

In fact, however, Bolsheviks repeatedly maintained that their hands were cleaner than those of their enemies. Violence is cruel, but this was something that, in general, Bolsheviks were not comfortable with. Those involved in establishing the new Soviet justice system took pride in the perceived distance between the “cruelties” of bourgeois states and Soviet power, which they viewed as “alien” to such cruelties.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Martin Latsis, a leading Chekist described by Alexander Rabinowitch as particularly “fanatical,”<sup>28</sup> wrote that, though the Soviet state was forced to resort to “drastic measures” (*krutyie meryi*), communists were far from the cruelties of their opponents.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the *Vecheka Weekly* was ordered to close down by the party Central Committee at the end of October following the publication of an article written by the Cheka in Nolinsk (Viatka province) that advocated the use of torture. The Central Committee reasoned that the article was “harmful and contradictory to the interests of the struggle for communism,”<sup>30</sup> presumably because it challenged the public representation of the virtuous Soviet fighter.

Unlike the mass police operations of the late 1930s mentioned above, the leaders of party and police during the Civil War felt the need for what Scott Smith calls a “participating audience.” Their “openness” regarding the violent and dictatorial nature of their rule was in part reflective of a moral righteousness that allowed and emboldened them, indeed required them, to speak candidly,

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<sup>27</sup> See Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatskii (hereafter GARF), f. A.353, op.2, d.23, l.38ob (Report of the People’s Commissariat of Justice to the Eighth All-Russian Commisariat of Soviets, 1919).

<sup>28</sup> A. Rabinovich, “Moisei Uritskii: Robesp’er Revoliutsionnogo Petrograda?,” *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, No.1 (2003), 3-21, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Latsis, *Dva goda bor’by na vnutrennem fronte. Populiarnyi obzor dvukhgodichnoi deiatel’nosti ChK* (Moscow, 1920), 64.

<sup>30</sup> G. Adibekova et al (comps.), *V.I. Lenin i VChK: sbornik dokumentov (1917-1922)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Moscow, 1987), No.86, 87.

as it would to speak publicly in criticism of their own regime (see below). The target audience of such “public transcripts” was the Bolsheviks themselves - and mainly the Chekists in the case of the *Vecheika Weekly* - in addition to the wider public. James Scott has explained the importance of public discourse for the dominant group itself as target audience, as a means to “convince themselves anew of their high moral purpose.”<sup>31</sup> Such discourse also tested the power of language to construct, rather than merely reflect, political realities,<sup>32</sup> something that would become more significant in the context of Soviet politics by the end of the 1920s.

For Smith, the “participating audience” was, in the main, the workers. In reality, however, Bolshevik leaders struggled to communicate their message to an already small reading public, and even lower-level party members, that often did not understand the political terminology of Bolshevik newspapers.<sup>33</sup> For the *Vecheika* leadership, there was an added imperative to reach beyond the barrier between rulers and ruled. The methods of the Chekas often provoked comparisons with the infamous equivalent of the tsarist state, the so-called Okhrana.<sup>34</sup> The *Weekly* therefore published a section, “From the archives of the Tsarist Okhranka,” to highlight the differences between the two police forces. Whereas the Okhranniki were considered to have been motivated by careerist and monetary purposes, the defenders of the worker-peasant government were supposedly possessed of justness and “force” (i.e. the force of the people). The journal declared that “Every worker should take a more or less active part in the suppression of counter-

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<sup>31</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CN, and London, 1990), 67.

<sup>32</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, 1997), 190; Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War*, 53-4; and Caryl Emerson, “New Words, New Epochs, Old Thoughts,” *The Russian Review* 55, no.3 (1996): 355-64, 358.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank you, comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 12-13.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, GARF, f. r-393, op.1, d.27, ll.79-81 (Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич to the NKVD, July 12, 1918).

revolutionary force, should consider themselves more or less active employees/collaborators of the extraordinary commissions [Chekas].”<sup>35</sup> The Chekas were supposed to be more than just the repressive “iron fist” of the proletarian dictatorship.

The published lists of those executed were also intended to break down the barrier between the observers and participants of this violence.<sup>36</sup> These lists (by no means comprehensive), along with brief descriptions of their identities and sometimes of their alleged crimes, were published in major newspapers and in the *Weekly* under the heading “Red terror.” Such lists also included hostages. The practice of hostage-taking was widely advocated by Lenin and applied during the Civil War as a brutally pragmatic measure to quell peasant rebellions or enforce state orders,<sup>37</sup> and it points further to the differences between the “terror” of the Civil War and the excisionary violence of the 1930s. Judging by the lists, it appears that the majority were shot for allegedly agitating against Soviet power.<sup>38</sup> Estimates of the total number of executed victims of the Terror vary. Il’ia Rat’kovskii puts the figure at 8,000 for the period August 30 until the end of the year; Nicolas Werth estimates between 10-15,000.<sup>39</sup> The majority of the Terror’s targets were former tsarist officers and representatives of the tsarist regime.<sup>40</sup>

There was some confusion both within the party and within the Vecheka as to whether the purpose of the Terror was to target the bourgeoisie as a class, or simply the most dangerous opponents of the state. The party leadership, including Lenin, clarified that it would be

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<sup>35</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.1, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *Captives of Revolution*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> See Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror*, e.g. 136.

<sup>38</sup> See *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.5, 225ff, 264-5.

<sup>39</sup> Rat’kovskii, *Krasnyi terror*, 199; Nicolas Werth, “A State against its People: Violence, Repression, and Terror in the Soviet Union,” in Stephane Courtois et al, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 78.

<sup>40</sup> See Rat’kovskii, *Krasnyi terror*, 170ff.

impermissible to practice physical violence against the bourgeoisie as a class.<sup>41</sup> However, within the Chekas there was a greater tendency to conceptualize violence in such terms. In Voronezh province, Chekists resolved in mid-September that they would rather “destroy the whole bourgeois class than give it victory.”<sup>42</sup> In 1919, a newspaper of the Ukrainian Cheka asserted that “If the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship throughout the world requires us to destroy all servants of tsarism and capitalism, then we will not halt before this but fulfill it with honour.”<sup>43</sup> Latsis published an infamous article in early November, in the journal of the Cheka in Kazan, that explained as the “essence” of the Red Terror that a suspect’s class should seal his/her fate, thereby earning himself Lenin’s censure.<sup>44</sup>

Lenin’s displeasure with Latsis was not an isolated incident; during the course of the Red Terror, the Vechecha was subjected to considerable criticism in the pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. Grigorii Zaks, a leading figure in the Vechecha, acknowledged in the *Weekly* that provincial and especially district Chekas often contained “unworthy” and even “criminal” elements in their ranks.<sup>45</sup> This is not to suggest that there were not many Chekists in the provinces who truly believed in the revolution, although their understanding of party ideology might have been rather crude and simplistic.<sup>46</sup> The Vechecha, however, was possessed of an institutional arrogance that

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Nikolai Osinskii, “‘Ognennaia pech’ proletariat,” in *Pravda*, September 11, 1918, 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.2, 125.

<sup>43</sup> *Krasnyi mekh*, August 18, 1918, in *VChK-GPU: Dokumenty i materialy*, ed. Iu. G. Fel’shtinskii (Moscow, 1995), 74.

<sup>44</sup> *Krasnyi terror*, November 1, 1918, 276. Lenin’s response, which was not published at the time, is available at Lenin, “A Little Picture in Illustration of Big Problems,” *Collected Works* 28. Accessed at [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/>](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/)

<sup>45</sup> Zaks, “Chistka,” *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.4, 168.

<sup>46</sup> See A.A. Plekhanov and A.M. Plekhanov, *Zheleznyi Feliks: belyie piatna v biografii chekista*, Moscow: Olma, 2010, 109; A.V. Ryzhikov, “Pervyi Predsedatel’ Ivanovo-Voznesenskoi GubChK V.N. Naumov,” in *Istoricheskie*

pervaded its dealings with other state agencies; Chekists realized that the survival of the revolution depended on them, in addition to the Red Army. For example, in late April 1918 Feliks Dzerzhinskii, the head of the Vecheka, wrote to the investigative commission of the Petrograd Revolutionary Tribunal in relation to the cases of two Chekists who had been arrested for wrongdoing following the shootings of six students. The Chekists may have been guilty of mistakes, Dzerzhinskii acknowledged, but if the investigative commission were to be guided by this spirit of “abstract humanitarianism,” then it should “bring to court our whole proletarian revolution.”<sup>47</sup>

Shortly after the commencement of the Terror, leading party figures such as Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, Karl Radek, and David Riazanov began to voice criticisms of the scale of Cheka operations and their expansion to affect members of the working class. Soon, however, the discussion focused on the position of the “extraordinary commissions” within the Soviet system.<sup>48</sup> In Soviet Russia in late 1918 and beyond we have a scenario whereby, as Donald Raleigh puts it, there was at times “broad disagreement on fundamental issues” within the ruling party.<sup>49</sup> Crucial questions of the new political order – its legal, constitutional, and institutional bases, the rule of law relative to the role of violence - were openly debated and contested, sometimes with considerable vituperation.

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*Chteniia na Lubianke 2004 god. Rukovoditeli i Sotrudniki Spetssluzhb Rossii*, ed. A.A. Zhdanov et al (Moscow, 2005), 40-41; G.A. Gavrilov, “Rol’ chekistov v stanovlenii sovetskoi vlasti na territorii viatskoi gubernii v 1918 godu,” in *Iz istorii viatskikh spetssluzhb i politzii (vtoraia polovina XIX – pervaiia polovina XX vv.)*, ed. V.E. Musikhin (Kirov, 1997), 61; and M.N. Petrov, *VChK-OGPU: pervoe desiatiletie. (Na materialakh Severo-Zapada Rossii)* (Novgorod, 1995), 52.

<sup>47</sup> Vinogradov and Peremyshlennikova (comps), *Arkhiv VChK*, pp.233-4; 227.

<sup>48</sup> See Rat’kovskii, *Krasnyi terror*, 219ff.

<sup>49</sup> Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia’s Civil War*, 53.

To critics within the party, the Chekas had become too powerful, unrestrained and arbitrary.<sup>50</sup> Grigorii Petrovskii, the Commissar of Internal Affairs (NKVD), wrote in *Izvestiia* in late September that without restraint, the Chekas would introduce “depravity” to Soviet power.<sup>51</sup> The issues at stake were not merely institutional rivalries but, as Lennard Gerson observes, “opposing tendencies within the revolution.”<sup>52</sup> One such set of opposing tendencies concerned the constitutional nature of the new state. The Soviet Constitution of July 1918 stated that all power in Soviet Russia “belongs to all the working population of the country, united in urban and rural soviets.”<sup>53</sup> The Vecheke, however, insisted that it retained ultimate authority over the Chekas, above the control of the executive committees of local soviets. Writing in *Izvestiia* on October 20, Viktor Tikhomirnov of the NKVD remarked at the fact that in many areas local Chekas were more powerful than local soviets. Tikhomirnov’s criticism was about administrative authority; he made it clear that he recognized the “extraordinarily important and necessary” work of provincial Chekas, and he suggested that the NKVD would not object to allowing Chekas autonomy from local soviets in “individual cases” when necessary.<sup>54</sup> By contrast other figures, such as Mikhail Ol’minskii, who sat on the editorial board of *Pravda*, and Nikolai Osinskii, the head of the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh), addressed the violence of the Chekas directly.

Ol’minskii reasoned that the “energetic and firm measures” of the Chekas were not always expedient, that leading Chekists were mistaken if they thought that it was merely ‘soft [spineless]’

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<sup>50</sup> See especially here Michael Melancon, “Revolutionary Culture in the Early Soviet Republic: Communist Executive Committees versus the Cheka, Fall 1918,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 57 (2009) : 1-22.

<sup>51</sup> G. Petrovskii, “K besede s Tov. Petersom,” *Izvestiia VTsIK*, September 22, 1918.

<sup>52</sup> Lennard Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin’s Russia* (Philadelphia, 1976), 203.

<sup>53</sup> See article 10 of the Constitution in O.I. Chistiakov, *Konstitutsiia RSFSR 1918 goda*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Moscow, 2003), 202.

<sup>54</sup> Tikhomirnov, “K voprosu o provintsial’nykh ChK,” *Izvestiia VTsIK*, October 20, 1918, 1-2.

comrades who were critical of the institution, and he responded to the Chekist dismissal of criticism as “idle phrases” by insisting that these issues should be discussed publicly.<sup>55</sup> Osinskii, writing earlier in the Terror, felt it necessary to remind *Pravda* readers that even though terror was necessary, the “destruction of the bourgeoisie as a class” should not mean “the physical extermination of all the bourgeoisie.”<sup>56</sup> Osinskii demonstrated clearly that some leading Bolsheviks were opposed to the extent of Chekist violence aside from considerations of public relations, or administrative and constitutional transgressions. Indeed more broadly, as Michael Melancon has demonstrated, although “mass class-based arrests, executions, and hostage-taking were part of Sovnarkom’s [Council of People’s Commissars] Red Terror program,” these policies “repulsed” many Soviet activists and party members due to the “unnecessary violence that alienated much of the population.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, several provincial soviets opposed the Terror outright; the executive committee in Pskov, for example, reasoned that “no absolutist state has managed to preserve itself in power by this bloody means.”<sup>58</sup> Iakov Peters, one of the Vecheka leaders and the principle defender of his institution during these public confrontations, gave an interview to *Izvestiia* in late September in which he accepted that the Terror had often assumed “undesirable forms” in the provinces, and that the elimination of the bourgeoisie as a class could not be accomplished through extermination.<sup>59</sup> However, the “openness” with which the Chekists conducted the Terror through the *Weekly* co-existed with a refutation of the legitimacy of dissent on matters of fundamental importance to them, though they did engage in debate. Chekists were vituperative in confrontations with their critics, even though they acknowledged the inadequacies of local Chekas.

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<sup>55</sup> M. Ol’minskii, “Tov. Peters i chrezvychainyie komissii,” *Pravda*, October 26, 1918, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Osinskii, ““Ognennaia pech’ proletariat,” *Pravda*, September 11, 1918, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Melancon, “Revolutionary Culture”: 8, 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> “Krasnyi terror. (Beseda s tov. Petersom),” *Izvestiia VTsIK*, September 29, 1918.

On October 22 *Izvestiia* published a stinging response to Tikhomirnov's article from the editorial board of the *Weekly*.<sup>60</sup> The "constitutional" arguments of the Vecheka's opponents were described as "philistine" and "petty-bourgeois" in nature. Local soviets were alleged to be composed, frequently, of "kulak" (exploitative rural) elements. The composition of such soviets allegedly contrasted with the leadership of the Chekas, who were described as mostly Bolsheviks of long standing.<sup>61</sup> More basically, the article contended that the Soviet Constitution, which *imagined* a socialist state, could not truly be realized until the final destruction of counter-revolution and the bourgeoisie.<sup>62</sup>

These debates exposed significant fault-lines within the party and between state institutions regarding the nature of the Soviet state, though Bolsheviks envisaged its eventual withering away. Chekists reasoned that it would be inappropriate, perhaps fatal for the revolution, to place the dictatorship under legal restrictions at a time of civil war. Were not the methods of struggle of the Chekas the highest revolutionary laws?, one contributor asked rhetorically in the *Weekly*.<sup>63</sup> In addition, what is evident here is how Chekists replicated the terms of debate used by Bolshevik leaders against the non-Bolshevik socialists - the supposedly "philistine," "petty-bourgeois" nature of their views, suggesting their illegitimacy - but applied these to Bolshevik critics.

On October 28, the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets (VTsIK, the Soviet government) adopted a resolution that affirmed the rights of local soviets to appoint and dismiss local Chekists, and NKIu and NKVD to delegate representatives to the

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<sup>60</sup> "Nash otvet," *Izvestiia VTsIK*, October 22, 1918.

<sup>61</sup> NKVD statistics published in January 1919 indicate that district-level soviets throughout Soviet territory were controlled by party members (without mentioning when they had joined), though there were several places where this was not the case. See *Vlast' Sovetov*, No.2, January 30, 1919, 4-5.

<sup>62</sup> "K voprosu o Chrezvychainyikh Komissiiakh," *Pravda*, October 23, 1918, 1.

<sup>63</sup> G. Shklovskii, "K voprosu o podchinenii Chrez. Komissii," *Ezhenedel'nik VChK*, No.3, 130.



Vecheka. It only stated, however, that decisions of Chekas could be overruled through the Cheka hierarchy (not by any other authority).<sup>64</sup> On November 6 the Extraordinary Sixth All-Russian Congress of Soviets declared that the “worker-peasant power” was “strengthened and consolidated,” and announced an amnesty for political prisoners (although certain types of prisoner, such as Tsarist gendarmes, were excluded from the amnesty).<sup>65</sup> The official policy of Red Terror can be considered to have ended at this point, though the use of terror continued during the Civil War.<sup>66</sup> The party was in agreement that reforms were required and that greater respect for the rule of law should be raised, and the Vecheka leadership consented. However, it was surely pleasant for Chekists to hear Lenin’s assessment, delivered at a Vecheka rally on November 7, that the attacks on the institution were “all narrow-minded and futile talk” that reminded him of “[Karl] Kautsky’s homily on the dictatorship, which is tantamount to supporting the bourgeoisie.”<sup>67</sup> The Vecheka’s continued existence was assured for the rest of the Civil War, and the party’s Central Committee resolved in December that there should be no place for “malicious criticism” of the state’s organizations (namely the Vecheka) in the press.<sup>68</sup>

### Political Religion and Soviet State Violence

In order to understand more deeply how and why Bolsheviks justified their practices of violence, it is necessary to examine the nature of the ideology in question. Leninism may provide the most clear-cut example of what can be considered a “political religion” or “secular religion.” This is not to suggest that Leninism can be reduced to this concept, or that it is the essential key to

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<sup>64</sup> V.I. Lenin i VChK, No.86, 87.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, No.91, 91.

<sup>66</sup> See Rat’kovskii, *Krasnyi terror*, 207.

<sup>67</sup> V.I. Lenin, “Speech at a Rally and Concert for the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission Staff, November 7 1918,” *Collected Works* 28. Accessed at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/>> on July 12, 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI), f.17, op.2, d.7, l.5 (Plenum of the Central Committee, December 19, 1918).

our understanding of the Soviet state.<sup>69</sup> It does, however, serve as a very useful heuristic technique that allows us to make greater sense of Leninism as a political phenomenon.<sup>70</sup> The historian of fascism Emilio Gentile, perhaps the leading advocate of the concept in recent years, identifies the characteristics of a political religion as, first and foremost, the teleological, eschatological orientation of an ideology that defines the meaning of life and “ultimate ends of human existence.” In addition, the existence of a “mythical” and “sacred” history connected with a “chosen people” that would serve as “the regenerating force of all mankind” points to the messianic dimension of political religions.<sup>71</sup> Most pertinent to the present discussion, a feature associated with political religions is the sanctification of violence for the ends described.<sup>72</sup>

Political religion concerns the sacralisation of politics, and the concept rests upon the assumption that religion and the sacred are not confined to the realm of other-worldly transcendental divinity, or at least that political religions can exist as ersatz (substitute) religions, or religious substitutes. This is perhaps the principal problem with the concept. The historian of religions Stanley Stowers argues that the concept of political religion rests on a false assertion of

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<sup>69</sup> See here Ehret, “Understanding the Popular Appeal of Fascism, National Socialism and Soviet Communism: The Revival of Totalitarianism Theory and Political Religion,” *History Compass* 5, no.4 (2007), 1236-1267, 1248.

<sup>70</sup> Stanley G. Payne, “On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and Its Application,” in *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics: Essays in Honour of Professor Stanley G. Payne*, ed. Roger Griffin, Robert Mallett and John Tortorice (Basingstoke, England, 2008), 22.

<sup>71</sup> See Emilio Gentile, “Political Religion: A Concept and its Critics – A Critical Survey,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no.1 (2005): 19-32, and Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2006). For a sophisticated critical appraisal of political religions theory from the perspective of a gendered reading of the dichotomy between elites and masses, see Kevin Passmore, “The Gendered Genealogy of Political Religions Theory,” *Gender and History* 20 (2008): 644-68. I do not see evidence for Passmore’s assertion that political religions theory “relies” on a distinction between a manipulative political elite and passive masses (658-9).

<sup>72</sup> Gentile, “Political Religion,” 29-30.

the nature of religion, and he questions why the sort of emotional-intellectual attributes of so-called political religions should be considered religious, as opposed to merely political, in nature.<sup>73</sup> In response to this, I refer to Philippe Burrin's important clarification that "It would be better to start with the metaphorical nature of the term 'political religion' and to recognize that the adjective is more important than the noun."<sup>74</sup> One additional problem is that applying this concept to Leninism might imply that Bolsheviks were "fanatics," thereby undermining their rationality as political actors. In response to this, I refer to an important recent monograph on fanatical violence by Roger Griffin, another prominent proponent of political religions theory. Griffin defines fanaticism not in the pejorative sense commonly associated with the word but, rather, as "a state of total commitment which allows no self-doubt, is intolerant of pluralism, moderation, and 'deviant' opinions...[whereby the fanatic is] capable of acts which transgress conventional civic or moral laws in the name of a higher principle."<sup>75</sup> Such an understanding of the term does appear applicable to committed Bolsheviks.

The sacred can be understood, as Mark Steinberg has put it, as a feeling for "images and stories that speak with a sense of awe and mystery of structures of meaning and power that reach [...] toward transcendent mythic qualities."<sup>76</sup> The revolutionary period coincided with a revival of religious and spiritual sentiment in Russian society, and for many Russians of differing social

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<sup>73</sup> Stanley Stowers, 'The Concepts of "Religion," "Political Religions" and the Study of Nazism,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, No.1 (Jan., 2007), 9-24. See also Mathias Behrens, "'Political religion' or a religion? Some remarks on the concept of religion," in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, 3 vols. ed. Hans Maier and Michael Schafer, trans. Jodi Bruhn (London and New York, 2007), 2: 225-45.

<sup>74</sup> Philippe Burrin, 'Political Religion: The Relevance of a Concept,' *History and Memory* 9, No.1/2 (Fall 1997), 326.

<sup>75</sup> Roger Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning* (Basingstoke, 2012), 19.

<sup>76</sup> Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2002), 9.

strata this era appeared to have apocalyptic significance.<sup>77</sup> More generally, to restrict understanding of the religious to its more conventional institutional sense is to overlook or underestimate the significance of religious (or religious-like) and sacred motivations as factors in modern political violence.<sup>78</sup>

The notion of secular or political religion dates back certainly to Rousseau and the French Revolution. In his *Political Theology*, an examination of sovereignty and the relationship between jurisprudence and theology published in 1922, Carl Schmitt considered that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>79</sup> Unsurprisingly, during the era of dictatorships in the 1930s and 1940s, scholars such as Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron devoted attention to the concept of political religion.<sup>80</sup> Much scholarly analysis of fascism and especially Soviet socialism during the Cold War, however, labored under the influence of a less sophisticated notion of “totalitarianism.” Yet it has long been recognized that the Bolsheviks, as adherents to an ideology with strong Salvationist/eschatological overtones, were certainly consonant with the Russian intellectual tradition.

For Nikolai Berdiaev, the Russian people were characterized by a religious way of thinking, and the messianism inherent in Marxism combined with the messianic “Russian Idea” to produce

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 250ff. See also *Sacred Stories. Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, ed. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman (Bloomington, IN and Indianapolis, IN, 2007), and B.I. Kolonitskii, “Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti-‘Burzhui’ Consciousness in 1917,” *Russian Review* 53, no.2 (1994): 193-4.

<sup>78</sup> The editors of a recent volume on twentieth-century European political violence write that religion did not play a “major role” in such violence generally. See Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York, 2011), 2.

<sup>79</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 36.

<sup>80</sup> Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 1ff.

Bolshevism.<sup>81</sup> Elements of the Christian narrative could be co-opted syncretically to describe the similar conceptual trajectory and emotional appeal of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>82</sup> In such cases the purpose was not simply rhetorical effect to communicate with a people steeped in Christian culture, but to suggest very sincerely that the true essence of the Christian ideas of Justice, Salvation, and deliverance from evil would be made manifest through the revolution. One newspaper in Ivanovo-Voznesensk province in 1920 characterized communism as the true “religion of humanity.”<sup>83</sup> This article referred to the importance of “belief” in the communist cause, rather than merely acceptance of the putative scientific truths of historical materialism. Similarly, a newspaper obituary for a Chekist in Saratov in 1919 celebrated the fact that the deceased had “piously, to fanaticism, believed in the triumphant outcome” of the proletariat’s struggle for freedom.<sup>84</sup> It is questionable whether the explicit use of religious language and imagery would have been approved by

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<sup>81</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, trans. R.M. French (London, 1947), 250. See also Peter J.S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism. Third Rome, revolution, Communism and after* (London and New York, 2000), 52. Igal Halfin has been the most influential recent advocate of the concept of political religion in the Soviet case, though he refers to a “secularized eschatology” rather than a “political religion.” For an example of a critical response to Halfin’s work, see Alexander Etkind, “Soviet Subjectivity. Torture for the Sake of Salvation?,” *Kritika* 6, No.1 (Winter, 2005), 181-4. Etkind suggests that Bolsheviks were merely “unconsciously” eschatological, but there appears to be ample evidence to the contrary.

<sup>82</sup> Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *Red Apocalypse: The Religious Evolution of Soviet Communism* (Lanham, MD, and London, 1996), 1, 44. Soviet propaganda generally made use of “familiar forms,” including Christian forms, to communicate with the populace. See, for example, Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1997), 7.

<sup>83</sup> See the article “Kommunist” on page 5 of the newspaper in RGASPI, f.17, op.60 (Agitprop), d.12, l.44ob (Concerning agitprop work in the countryside and political education of the party).

<sup>84</sup> N.I. Shabinov and N.A. Makarov, eds., *Gubcheka. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov iz istorii Saratovskoi gubernskoi chrezvyichainoi komissii 1917-1921gg.* (Saratov, 1980), No.81, 94-5.

Moscow.<sup>85</sup> Bolsheviks, after all, were militant atheists, and the state's anti-religious publications stressed the falsity of any sort of religious belief.<sup>86</sup> Before the revolution, Lenin had condemned the "God-builder" movement conceived by some Bolsheviks who sought to develop social-democracy as a form of religion.<sup>87</sup> Yet it is also true that the ruling party had an "ambivalent" relationship with the sacred, and leading Bolsheviks sometimes publicly replicated explicitly religious language.<sup>88</sup>

It is quite evident here that despite their atheism, it was crucially important for Bolsheviks to invoke the spiritual and emotional strength of some sense of transcendent purpose to individual life within secular historical time.<sup>89</sup> It should not be surprising, then, that the Soviet institutions involved in direct armed struggles should celebrate their dead as martyrs, whose lives and deaths would be vindicated by the triumph of socialism. In an obituary in the *Vecheika Weekly* for a deceased young female Chekist, the editor wrote: "Awareness of such a bitter, difficult loss would be almost unbearable, if we did not know that we carry with us the great truth of Socialism, the great emancipation of all the exploited and deprived." The "pure blood" of the deceased had been given, with love, for the future of the world's workers.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the vision of the New Soviet

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<sup>85</sup> See Mark Steinberg, "Workers on the Cross: Religious Imagination in the Writings of Russian Workers, 1910-1924," *The Russian Review* 53, no.2 (1994): 213-39, 221-2.

<sup>86</sup> See I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, *O pravovoi i nepravovoi vere, ob istinnykh i lozhnykh bogakh* (Moscow, 1961 [1921]).

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Read, *Religion, Revolution, and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1900-1912: The Vekhi Debate and its Intellectual Background* (London, 1979), 77ff.

<sup>88</sup> See Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives!: the Lenin cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 82; Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 248ff.

<sup>89</sup> See Roger Griffin, "Introduction: The Evolutions and Convolutions of Political Religion," in *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics*, ed. Griffin et al, 13; and Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN, 2011), 55ff.

<sup>90</sup> *Ezhenedel'nik VChK*, No.1, 58. See also *Krasnoarmeets*, No.1, 1919, 12

Person was not the warrior-figure of Nazi imagery.<sup>91</sup> Fighters for the Soviet cause were called upon to steel their hearts when in battle,<sup>92</sup> but the conventional understanding of the Bolshevik emotional sphere as one, essentially, of class-based enmity and “toughness” is inadequate.<sup>93</sup> The ideal Soviet citizen was to possess a moral purity and highly-developed sense of love and compassion. One Bolshevik declared at a party conference in Novgorod province in late 1918 that the ideal person of the communist future – and to which standard communists should strive at the present time - would be “a bearer of absolute truth and justice. In his soul – complete harmony, love for life, himself included.”<sup>94</sup> Mirroring the communitarian essence of the Russian religious concept of *sobornost*, and the New Testament, the obituary for the fallen young Chekist remarked that “we do not know a greater love” than to give one’s life for the sake of the future of others. Not surprisingly, this theme had appeared in explicitly Christian form in Russian propaganda during the First World War.<sup>95</sup> Berdiaev asserted that the communist type “completely in the grip

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<sup>91</sup> See Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck, “The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany,” in *Beyond Totalitarianism. Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (New York, 2009), 302-45.

<sup>92</sup> See *Ezhenedel'nik VChK*, No.1, 63; 78-9.

<sup>93</sup> Berdiaev criticized Bolsheviks for being “gripped by hatred,” possessed by a “preponderance of hate over love,” and he asserted that “only love turns a man towards the future.” Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, trans. R.M. French (Ann Arbor, MI, 1969), 184. My understanding of the importance of emotional development to the Bolshevik revolutionary project has been informed by Anna Toropova, “The Education of Feeling: Cinema and the Emotional Community of Stalinism,” unpublished BASEES paper, April 2014. Cited with the kind permission of Dr. Toropova.

<sup>94</sup> RGASPI, f.17, op.4 (CC Secretariat), d.53, l.32 (Protocol of the 5<sup>th</sup> Uezd Party Conference of Bogolovskogo uezd, November 19, 1918).

<sup>95</sup> Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, 35-6.

of the service of an idea and capable of enormous sacrifices” was possible “only as the result of the Christian training of the human spirit.”<sup>96</sup>

The revolution and the struggle against the “enemies of the people” that followed, then, served as the Bolsheviks’ redemptive, sacrificial passage from the old world to the new. René Girard has explained that sacrificial customs are concerned with “a radically new type of violence, truly decisive and self-contained, a form of violence that will put an end once and for all to violence itself.”<sup>97</sup> This dialectical notion of violence to end violence is of cardinal importance for understanding how violence in the service of the revolution was not simply justified but sacralized in Bolshevik thought. One article of August 1918 in the newspaper of the Petrograd Soviet referred to the “redemptive sacrifices/victims” (*iskupitel’nyie zhertyi*) demanded by “fate” – or history – for the “emancipation of humankind.”<sup>98</sup> Writing in the *Vecheika Weekly*, one Chekist reasoned strikingly that “we have set about merciless struggle” against the bourgeoisie because “we value and love life too much – it is a sacred gift of nature.” What is evident here is the importance of the First World War as an imperialist war in the Bolshevik legitimation and justification of revolutionary violence. The bourgeoisie were slowly draining the “juices of life” from the proletariat and would engineer further wars in the future.<sup>99</sup> In this regard, as Julie Fedor has

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<sup>96</sup> Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism*, 170.

<sup>97</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London and New York, 2008 [1972]), 28.

<sup>98</sup> “Voina imperialista i voina grazhdanskaia,” *Severnaia Kommuna*, 20 August 1918, 1.

<sup>99</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.1, 55-6; see also Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror*, 115. It is interesting to compare such reasoning with the apparently similar reflections of Walter Benjamin in his 1921 essay on violence. For Benjamin, “The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life,” and he reasoned that however sacred life may be, “there is no sacredness in his [man’s - *sic*] condition, in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow men.” However, Benjamin’s opposition of a “divine violence” to the “mythic violence” and fantasy associated with humanity’s attempts to appropriate divine power through “law-making” and “law-preserving” violence, appears to be very different to Bolshevik attempts to



brilliantly argued, the Soviet concept of “active humanism” – the necessity of taking (violent) action to eradicate the sources of human suffering – was quite central to the representation of violence as morally good.<sup>100</sup>

In his excellent study of Soviet moral representations of violence through literature, Dariusz Tolczyk identifies two literary strategies that were utilized in the 1920s in order to justify violence. The first was based around the idea of tragedy. The historical necessity of violence requires actions that are themselves contrary to the actors’ ultimate opposition to violence in human affairs, and so creates a certain amount of ethical ambivalence. We have seen that there was a significant amount of such ambivalence, even disdain, towards violence amongst Bolsheviks at all levels. The other, and according to Tolczyk principal strategy utilized, was ethical iconoclasm: a reversal of the negative moral connotations of violence. Not only is there no ethical hang-over, but where necessary violence becomes ethically positive in the service of the revolution due to “unquestioning faith” in the revolution as “salvation.” Violence becomes “totally purified” in the process.<sup>101</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to see these two strategies in as distinct a manner as Tolczyk seems to suggest.<sup>102</sup> Even in the *Vecheika Weekly*, where violence was openly and unabashedly announced, bloodshed was not morally unproblematic. For example, G. Shklovskii

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claim purity for their violent means as state violence. Benjamin’s “divine” violence is truly divine as well as human, and his apparent advocacy of violence is that “outside the law” as “revolutionary violence.” See “Critique of Violence,” in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1996), 1: 251, and James R. Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (London and New York, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security: The Chekist Tradition, from Lenin to Putin* (London and New York, 2011), 17.

<sup>101</sup> Dariusz Tolczyk, *See No Evil. Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (New Haven, CN, and London, 1999), 65ff.

<sup>102</sup> On the complexities of literary treatments of war and violence in the early Soviet period, see Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*, chapter four.

wrote of the French Revolution that “no-one can be gladdened by the spilling of blood, but with critical analysis of historical events it becomes clear to anyone that the French people were forced to resort to terrible means.”<sup>103</sup>

Sometimes elements of both strands identified by Tolczyk were evident in the same text. One article in the central *Izvestiia* noted that “Terror for us is not a system, but a terrible necessity of the present decisive moment of world history.” This was not, however, simply a case of the end justifying the means; the author made it clear that the sword was being wielded “in the name of the highest ideals of humanity,” that a virtue could be made of necessity.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, Bolsheviks self-consciously inhabited a supreme ethical sphere, effectively “beyond good and evil” as understood in particular historical contexts.<sup>105</sup> In the words of an article in *Petrogradskaia Pravda* (quoting Clara Zetkin), “Bolsheviks cannot avoid measures that are not measurable on an ethical-historical scale.”<sup>106</sup> Such lofty language was not merely “external,” for public consumption, but expressive of the convictions that had driven the party to power, and it was not merely the language of the party elite in the major cities. For example, the Cheka chairman of Bel’skii district in Smolensk province told a local congress in early 1919 that the struggle ahead was for “the future of humanity.”<sup>107</sup> The purification of violence, its sacralization as a means to the ultimate end, was sometimes made very explicit. In Bolshevik discourse, the purification of violence usually required a removal of focus from the act of violence to its practitioners. Simply put, violence in the interest of the revolution could not be compared as like with imperialist or reactionary violence. The agents of counter-revolutionary violence were often described as having been, quite literally, “bought”

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<sup>103</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.2, 100.

<sup>104</sup> “Mirovaia voina i krasnyi terror”, *Izvestiia VTsIK*, 18 September 1918, 1.

<sup>105</sup> See Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> V. Byistrianskii, “Mirovyie krizisy i nraivstvennaia otsenka,” *Petrogradskaia Pravda*, 3 January 1919, 1.

<sup>107</sup> L. Borisova et al (comps), *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1998), 1: No.66, 111. See also Gavrilov, “Rol’ chekistov,” 61.

by international capital, or simply as defenders of their “monetary power.” Their “base” (*podlyi*) motives stood in contrast to the supposed purity, selflessness and humanity of the fighters for Soviet power, as well as the justness of their cause.<sup>108</sup> To quote from an article of January 1919 in *Petrogradskaia Pravda*: “Violence, which the proletariat sets in motion, is sanctified (*osviashchaetsia*) in the eyes of the wide masses by that great goal which it serves!”<sup>109</sup>

In thus sanctifying their acts of violence, Bolsheviks were neither original nor unusual. In the context of modern Russian history they were clearly continuing - in power - the tradition of revolutionary terrorists in late imperial Russia to cloak themselves in innocence, as Susan Morrissey has explained, to purify their acts of violence relative to the “real” violence of the imperial state.<sup>110</sup> Violence was also justified in both manifestations as an essential requirement for asserting and establishing its antithesis: nonviolence and human dignity.<sup>111</sup> The sacrality of violence in both types was strongly connected to the construction of an ethos of martyrdom and sacrifice (as discussed above), in a paradoxical willingness to assert the sacredness of life by relinquishing one’s own and/or that of others. Scholars of revolutionary terrorism in late imperial Russia have observed the centrality of self-sacrifice to the representation of such acts as virtuous, and perhaps to alleviating the guilt associated with the act of violence.<sup>112</sup> In Soviet Russia in 1918,

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<sup>108</sup> See *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.2, 92-3, and “Kto pobedit?,” *Severnaia Kommuna*, 26 September 1918, evening edition, 1. See also Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security*, 17-21.

<sup>109</sup> Byistrianskii, “Mirovyie krizisy i nraivstvennaia otsenka,” *Petrogradskaia Pravda*, 3 January 1919, 1.

<sup>110</sup> Susan K. Morrissey, “The ‘Apparel of Innocence’: Toward a Moral Economy of Terrorism in Late Imperial Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History* 84, no.3 (2012): 607-642, esp.611.

<sup>111</sup> See *ibid*, 611.

<sup>112</sup> See Sally A. Boniece, “The Spiridonova Case, 1906: Terror, Myth, and Martyrdom,” *Kritika* 4, no.3 (2003): 571-606, 581; Morrissey, “The ‘Apparel of Innocence’,” 611; Anthony Anemone, “Introduction: Just Assassins?,” in *Just Assassins: The Culture of Terrorism in Russia*, ed. Anthony Anemone (Evanston, IL, 2010), 5; and Lynn

the requirement for Chekists to prepare themselves for self-sacrifice, in apparent mimesis of Christ's ultimate salvific sacrifice, was clearly announced in the *Vecheika Weekly*: "The decisive hour is approaching: be prepared to die for the triumph of the world revolution."<sup>113</sup>

This is not, however, to suggest that Bolshevik constructions of justification for violence after 1917 simply grew out of this earlier Russian revolutionary ethos, not least because the type of violence (mass state violence versus individual terrorism) was very different, and because the First World War altered the context for the Bolshevik understanding of violence more generally. Indeed, in a broader transnational and contemporary context, the concepts of "holy war," martyrdom and self-sacrifice, in the Christian tradition, were important components of propaganda aimed at soldiers and civilians during the First World War.<sup>114</sup> Many religious figures during the war sacralized the conflict against national enemies as a form of redemptive purification for the nations involved.<sup>115</sup> Yet while the crossovers between politics and religion may be commonplace in modern history – and especially at a time of war – "political religion" as a distinct analytical category remains valid to describe those movements such as Bolshevism that are usually referred to as "totalitarian." That is, such movements are absolutist, preclude the circulation of contrary viewpoints, and espouse a single specific truth-claim regarding the teleological purpose of a people or humanity in general.<sup>116</sup>

### Reform or Repression? Legality and Terror

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Ellen Patyk, "Remembering 'The Terrorism': Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii's 'Underground Russia'," *Slavic Review* 68, no.4 (2009), 758-581, 774, 778.

<sup>113</sup> *Ezhenedel'nik VChK*, No.6, p.243.

<sup>114</sup> See here Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago, IL, 2004), and also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites. The Origins and History of the Passions of War* (London, 1997), esp. 18.

<sup>115</sup> See James McMillan, "War," in *Political Violence*, ed. Bloxham and Gerwarth, 52-5.

<sup>116</sup> See Gentile, *Politics as religion*, xiv ff.

The distinction between political and non-political crime was not very clear-cut in Soviet Russia. Ultimately, all criminality was incompatible with the eschatological purpose of the regime. Leninism posited a belief in the effective perfectibility of humankind through development of a new type of person capable of living under communism. Belief in the attainability of an aesthetically pure, harmonious and unitary future society required the removal of imperfections and the active sculpting of society by the state. The practical demonstration of this came especially in the 1930s as the party and police sought to cope with criminality and social disorder through increasing excisionary violence directed against criminals and other “anti-soviet elements.” It is therefore important for the student of Soviet state violence to address the significance and development of Soviet criminology. In addition, it is important here to turn our attention briefly to the Justice Commissariat (NKIu) as the main institutional counter-weight to the political police in the Soviet state, in order to compare and contrast the respective approaches to repression of the two institutions.

Countering notions of a linear development from Leninist penal policy to the Stalinist GULAG, Peter Solomon notes that the Civil War period witnessed the development of “a progressive policy, which differed radically from that practiced by the Cheka and OGPU.”<sup>117</sup> In fact, the legal scholars Piers Beirne and Alan Hunt have suggested that “Russian Bolshevism was in the vanguard of the neoclassical movement” in criminal justice in comparative European terms. The neoclassical approach to crime assumes a somewhat positivist understanding that places responsibility on social circumstances to some extent rather than just the agency of the criminal, as well as a belief in rehabilitation of the offender.<sup>118</sup> M(iacheslav) Kozlovskii of NKIu, writing

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<sup>117</sup> Peter H. Solomon, Jr., “Soviet Penal Policy, 1917-1934: A Reinterpretation,” *Slavic Review* 39, no.2 (1980): 195-217, 195-6.

<sup>118</sup> Piers Beirne and Alan Hunt, “Lenin, Crime, and Penal Politics, 1917-1924,” in *Revolution in Law: Contributions to the Development of Soviet Legal Theory, 1917-1938*, ed. Piers Beirne (Armonk, NY and London, 1990), 107.

in the first edition of the Commissariat's journal in August 1918, outlined the orthodox Marxist position that crime in capitalist society is a product of the anarchy of production that leads to social instability. "Every crime," he explained, "is a product of irreconcilable class antagonisms," and not a person's "free will." The corollary was that, with the disappearance of economic inequality, crime would eventually disappear.<sup>119</sup>

If all crime, then, was determined principally by forces external to the criminal, how should the state and the law deal with a criminal who was not, ultimately, responsible? Kozlovskii's article contained a fascinating discussion of the metaphysics of human nature. He disagreed with the assertion of the Austrian socialist lawyer Anton Menger that crime would continue to result from "human instincts" even under desirable social conditions. The implication of Kozlovskii's argument was not, however, that strong punitive measures or even "terror" would be inappropriate under proletarian law. In the transitional period between capitalism and communism, he explained, an enormous legacy of crime had transferred. Soviet penal policy would abandon the principle of "retribution" and seek, rather, the "correction" of the criminal. However, though cruelty would not be part of Soviet penal policy, "punishment" could not be dispensed with. The sole purpose of punishment would be the defense of society from criminal "encroachment." He reasoned that the state would need to act with "resolute surgical measures, measures of terror and isolation" for the defense of society.<sup>120</sup> Thus, Kozlovskii had arrived at an argument that reconciled progressive jurisprudence with forms of state violence.

Soviet legal theorists were in fact unambiguous about the law as an instrument of class struggle. "We openly declare," wrote Pëtr Stuchka, briefly Commissar of Justice and a leading

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<sup>119</sup> M. Kozlovskii, "Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i ugovnoe pravo," *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.1 (1918): 26-7.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 27.

Soviet legal theorist, that until classes were abolished “our courts will be *class* courts.”<sup>121</sup> Dmitrii Kurskii, Justice Commissar from August 1918, stated that Revolutionary Tribunals were not courts “in the true sense of the word” but, rather, “special organizations for struggle with counter-revolution.”<sup>122</sup> Conversely, leading Chekists such as Dzerzhinskii were not necessarily opposed to the “progressive” approach to reforming offenders, and considered concentration camps means of re-education as well as rational utilization of the labour of inmates.<sup>123</sup> It would be wrong, then, to think that NKIu and the political police were at fundamentally contrary purposes. Bolsheviks understood both state and law as temporary institutions of the transitional stages to communism, and the law was supposed to be sufficiently “flexible” to accommodate revolutionary expediency. Laws should be observed and respected, Lenin emphasized, but it was clear in his mind that courts were also important instruments both of terror and of popular education.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, with the introduction of NEP and curtailment of the political police, Lenin wrote to Kurskii in 1922: “An *especially* militant role now falls to the People’s Commissariat of Justice.”<sup>125</sup>

Nonetheless important differences existed between the Vecheka and NKIu, in terms of ideas and institutional practices. Chekists tended to adopt an approach quite different to that of Soviet legal theorists regarding the question of criminal agency, though naturally their focus was more on dangerous counter-revolutionaries than regular criminals. For example, an article in the Ukrainian Cheka newspaper *Krasnyi mech* (*The Red Sword*) advised those “amongst our comrades” who entertained the notion that the guilt of “predators” was alleviated somewhat by

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<sup>121</sup> P. Stuchka, “Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i sud,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.1, 5.

<sup>122</sup> *Materialyi Narodnogo Komissariata Iustitsii* 1 (Moscow, 1918), 60.

<sup>123</sup> See Vinogradov and Peremyshlennikova (comps.), *Arkhiv VChK*, 144-6.

<sup>124</sup> See Jane Burbank, “Lenin and the Law in Revolutionary Russia,” *Slavic Review* 54, no.1 (1995): 23-44, esp. 40ff. See, further, Eugene Huskey, “A Framework for the Analysis of Soviet Law,” *Russian Review* 50, no.1 (1991): 53-70.

<sup>125</sup> See Ryan, *Lenin’s Terror*, 168.

their circumstances to stand aside and not impede others (Chekists) from implementing their “sacred responsibilities before the Revolution.”<sup>126</sup> The Cheka in Morshansk (Tambov province) reasoned that there could be no “softness” shown to those who act “consciously” (*soznatel’no*) to strangle the people.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, an article in the *Weekly* referred to former tsarist gendarmes, etc. as “corrupt souls” that should be struck from the face of the earth.<sup>128</sup> This may be contrasted with Stuchka’s assertion that he could not “reproach” the bourgeois intelligentsia because they were as responsible for their ideological views as for “the colour of their hair.”<sup>129</sup>

The discussion of crime and counter-revolution through medicalized language was a significant feature of Bolshevik discourse and its justification of violence and repression. Indeed through this language, as indicated by the Kozlovskii article, the progressive (Justice) and repressive (Cheka) strands of thought could be reconciled somewhat. The Chekist Latsis wrote that “It is necessary to chop off [*otsekat*] every unfit member of society so as not to lose the whole organism,”<sup>130</sup> a logic of social prophylaxis that would be shared by Nazi doctors in Auschwitz.<sup>131</sup> The Cheka in Morshansk described the Red Terror as “anti-infectious inoculation.”<sup>132</sup> Medicalized language served two broad purposes in Soviet punitive discussions. First, it provided rhetorical form for a progressive penal policy that sought the “healing” of offenders and their restoration to health and society. Second, it added justification to repressive measures - whether execution or incarceration - as life-affirming and healing/prophylactic for the wider body-politic. Medicalized language and, as Daniel Beer has demonstrated in his account of Russian criminology across the

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<sup>126</sup> *Krasnyi mek*, 18 August 1919, in Fel’shtinskii (comp.), *VChK-GPU*, 74.

<sup>127</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.1, 79.

<sup>128</sup> “Stranichka iz psikhologii okhrannika,” *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.3, 136.

<sup>129</sup> P. Stuchka, “Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i sud,” 8.

<sup>130</sup> Latsis, *Dva goda bor’byi*, 70.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors. Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York, 2000), 16.

<sup>132</sup> *Ezhenedel’nik VChK*, No.1, 78.



revolutionary dividing point of 1917, the development of a conceptualization of deviance and crime through the co-optation of biomedical theories in Soviet ideology, “lent coherency and specificity to the Bolsheviks’ fears about the residual effects of capitalism on the mentality and morality of its citizens after 1917.”<sup>133</sup> More broadly, biomedical discourse as a framework for understanding social issues may be considered a “central defining characteristic of modernity.”<sup>134</sup>

The healing purpose of Soviet penal policy - the “treatment of criminal elements” rather than their punishment in a retributive sense - was explained by L. Savrasov, head of the Punitive Department and NKIu Collegium member. Prison was to be a type of “social clinic” that would treat inmates differentially; Soviet legal theorists appreciated that social conditions could produce individuals with nasty inclinations.<sup>135</sup> The task of re-education would involve both labour and “cultural-educational work” in the reformatories. Prisoners were to acquire a love of work, and this would allow them to join “the great family of the workers” as healthy, useful members.<sup>136</sup> In reality, early prisoner release was common in the first years of Soviet power, especially as prisons were usually overcrowded. However, there arose in Soviet penal policy a tension between the reformatory impulse and the necessity of ensuring social defense from the “contagion” of

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<sup>133</sup> Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia. The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity, 1880-1930* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2008), 203.

<sup>134</sup> Edward Ross Dickinson, “Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on Our Discourse About ‘Modernity’,” *Central European History* 37, no.1 (2004), 1-48, 3. See, further, Michel Foucault, “The Punitive Society,” in Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, 3 vols, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al (London, 1997), 1: 32-5.

<sup>135</sup> L. Savrasov, “Prestuplenie i nakazanie v tekushchii perekhodnyi period,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.5-6 (1-15 October 1918): 24; L. Savrasov, “K voprosu ob organizatsii obshchikh mest zakliucheniia,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.7, 40-42. See Ia. Berman, “K voprosu ob Ugolovnom kodekse sotsialisticheskogo gosudarstva,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo* 11 (1919): 44.

<sup>136</sup> GARF, f.A353, op.2, d.618, l.73 (Situation concerning educational work in places of confinement, 1918-1920).

criminality and deviance, which may be understood in terms of a more general interaction between intentions and realities. With the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the early 1920s, opinion in NKIu would more or less come to accept that a more differentiated approach to the criminal population was required, one that postulated that not all would be reformed. Nikolai Krylenko, then deputy Commissar of Justice, pointedly declared at a national penal congress in 1923 that “in present circumstances” the principal purpose of criminal justice was the protection of society, not the protection or reform of individuals.<sup>137</sup> By the middle of the 1920s, the use of extrajudicial police measures to remove “socially-dangerous elements” was common, and would intensify in the course of the following decade.<sup>138</sup>

From as early as 1918, in fact, the question arose as to whether or not the state would be able to reform certain categories of deviants and criminals.<sup>139</sup> Chekists were more likely to consider the counter-revolutionaries that they encountered as incorrigible.<sup>140</sup> However, in an article of October 1918 in the NKIu journal, Savrasov directly posed the question whether it would always be possible to “correct” the criminal, and if there should not be, in certain cases, “punishment in the literal sense of the word?” What he had in mind was crimes of large-scale speculation, bribery, and serious abuse of office, all of which he considered political in nature.<sup>141</sup> In reality, speculation – the crime category that Savrasov focused upon - was not dealt with particularly harshly through the courts during the Civil War.<sup>142</sup> However, Savrasov’s comments about certain incorrigible

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<sup>137</sup> “Vserossiiskii s’ezd rabotnikov penitentsiarnogo dela,” *Ezhenedel’nik Sovetskoi Iustitsii*, No.41 (1923): 949.

<sup>138</sup> See Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police*, and Shearer, *Policing Stalin’s Socialism*.

<sup>139</sup> On this question through the 1930s, see Steven A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption. The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society* (Princeton, NJ, and London, 2011), esp.67.

<sup>140</sup> See here Latsis, *Dva goda bor’by*, 15.

<sup>141</sup> Savrasov, “Prestuplenie i nakazanie v tekushchii perekhodnyi period,” *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.5-6 (1918): 24-6.

<sup>142</sup> See GARF, f.A353, op.1, d.3, ll.228, 233, 313 and 319 (Information on convicts, 1917-1919).

criminal types that should be isolated from society add a useful corrective to Paul Hagenloh's important book on Stalinist policing. Hagenloh asserts that the dominant views around criminal elements as dangerous "contingents" (or a criminal class) that needed to be removed from society, which developed through the 1930s, originated from within the police system and not the legal or criminological profession.<sup>143</sup> Basic elements of this view, albeit with regard to very particular types of criminal, existed within the upper echelons of NKIu as early as 1918.

Savrasov's views on large-scale speculation and serious crimes of responsible office were close to those of leading Chekists, who pointed out that these crimes were linked with counter-revolution and should be punished mercilessly, up to and including execution.<sup>144</sup> Savrasov's article was strongly criticized in the NKIu journal by Iakov Berman, a Bolshevik lawyer and later legal scholar, who thought that Savrasov's views would result in the abandonment of a humane penal policy.<sup>145</sup> Some months later, Savrasov accepted that his views were somewhat "heretical," as in Soviet penal theory "there are no incorrigible criminals." He explained, however, that there was simply neither enough time nor resources to reform all criminals; general prisons (as opposed to reformatories) or isolators, he reasoned, were really for those who were not inclined to reform, and hence should not be labeled "correction institutions." He concluded that the Bolsheviks, responsible for burying the "rotting corpse" of bourgeois society, should not worry about salvaging all the "filth" of that society.<sup>146</sup>

## Conclusions

The fledgling Soviet order faced a life-and-death struggle for survival in the Civil War, and the radicalization of the state's approach to violence during 1918 was very much in response to

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<sup>143</sup> Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police*, 81.

<sup>144</sup> See for example Vinogradov and Peremyishlennikova (comps.), *Arkhiv VChK*, 87-8, 225, 233.

<sup>145</sup> Iak. Berman, "Nakazanie ili ispravlenie?," *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia i pravo*, No.8-9-10 (1918): 46-51.

<sup>146</sup> L. Savrasov, "K voprosu o nakazanii," *ibid*, 11 (1919): 74-82, 75, 79.

the enormous economic and military difficulties faced, as well as the reality of “White” terror. Intense fears of invasion, and of counter-revolutionary penetration of the interior, remained with the Bolsheviks in the coming decades. However the utopian, religious-like nature of their ideological vision of a perfectly harmonious communist future drove them with terrible, tragic irony to establish the most violently destructive and repressive state order in peacetime Europe in the twentieth century. One can conclude, with reference to Terry Eagleton, that many of the Bolsheviks approached violence without “piety,”<sup>147</sup> without recognising as their own the terrible destructive capacity that resides in human civilizations and especially modern civilization, but attributed this to the sphere of a capitalist order that they were intending to destroy.

The Bolsheviks, unlike the Nazis, conceived violence dialectically, as a means of overcoming itself that would lead to true peace and harmony in the world. This allowed them not only to justify their acts of violence but to retain the identity-distinction between themselves and those who were truly violent: the class enemy. The result was that violence in the service of the Bolsheviks’ ideological vision could be - and was - rendered pure and sacred. Violence was, largely though not always, openly and unashamedly proclaimed during the Civil War, reflecting its perceived legitimacy in a way similar to the open and fearless acts of revolutionary terrorism during the last years of the imperial autocracy.<sup>148</sup> Yet there were limits to this process, as such explicit violent discourse could not last for long. The Bolsheviks, after all, had a complex ideological relationship with violence. On the one hand, leading figures such as Lenin and Trotskii were convinced that revolution could not be successful without it; on the other, they were in principle opposed to cruelty and indeed to violence itself as a feature of human relations, and Soviet criminal justice was premised on a highly progressive approach to criminal reform rather than repression. Indeed, as in the Russian revolutionary tradition more broadly, there existed a distinct “ethical duality” within

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<sup>147</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford, 2005), 16-7.

<sup>148</sup> Morrissey, “The ‘Apparel of Innocence’,” 624.

the Bolshevik discourse on violence, both a condemnation and embrace of it.<sup>149</sup> Condemning the horrifying violence of the First World War, they insisted that the way to eradicate such brutality for humanity was through truly just, class warfare. By the 1930s, as Dariusz Tolczyk explains, the initial justification that violence was required as a *temporary* means to defeat the revolution's enemies was beginning to wear thin,<sup>150</sup> and especially once the triumph of socialist construction had been declared by 1934. The openness that accompanied much of the violence of the Civil War began to disappear, and the violent police "mass operations" of the late 1930s were supposed to be "absolutely secret."

There were alternative currents in Bolshevik thought regarding violence and repression. In particular, Soviet legal theorists stressed the reform of deviants whereas Chekists were focused on repression, and the extent of the criticism levelled against the Cheka apparatus during the Red Terror clearly indicates significant divergent tendencies within the party and state apparatus. The debates within the party during the Terror also suggest, as Michael Melancon has argued, the existence of a deep-rooted, more democratic political culture amongst grassroots Bolshevik activists within the soviet apparatus, one that was contrary to the Leninist vision of one-party rule backed up by the terror of the Chekas – the vision that ultimately triumphed.<sup>151</sup> Yet the "progressive" approach to penal reform was founded on the same utopian belief in the perfectibility of humankind and future society, the Salvationist impulse of Leninism, and the language of social medicine that served to justify violence.

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<sup>149</sup> Ryan, *Lenin's Terror*, 15; see also Nick Hewlett, "Marx, Engels, and the Ethics of Violence in Revolt," *The European Legacy* 17, no.7 (2012): 882-898, 889.

<sup>150</sup> See Tolczyk, *See No Evil*, 279.

<sup>151</sup> See Melancon, "Revolutionary culture": 1-22, 7.

