Lenin and the Red Terror

C N Trueman "The Red Terror"  
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The Red Terror was carried out in post-revolutionary Russia by the [Cheka](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/the_Cheka.htm) headed by [Felix Dzerzhinsky](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/felix_dzerzhinsky.htm) along with units of the Red Army. The Red Terror started as a result of an attempt to kill [Vladimir Lenin](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vladmir_lenin.htm) by Fanni Kaplin in August 1918 and the murder of the Cheka leader in St. Petersburg. This failed assassination attempt on Lenin was used as a rationale for the secret police and the army to round up and deal with anyone suspected of counter-revolutionary activities. From his hospital bed Lenin instructed the Cheka to “prepare for terror”.

There was no obvious government body that could hold back the work of the Cheka. Dzerzhinsky could simply explain the organization’s work: for example the arrest and execution of 800 people in St. Petersburg in 1918 was explained away as those executed were ‘enemies of the state’ or ‘enemies of the revolution’. Few were brave enough to argue with such an accusation in case they themselves were accused of the same crime. None of the 800 was put on trial. They were arrested and then shot. Dzerzhinsky himself said that the Cheka operated on a 24 hour basis: those who were held were usually dealt with within 24 hours. The Red Terror last from September 1918 to October 1918 though some believe that it actually lasted until the end of the [Russian Civil War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russian_civil_war1.htm). The work of the Cheka during the Red Terror received the support of Lenin who argued on its behalf that the people they were dealing with were trying to re-establish into power those who had abused and exploited others in pre-revolutionary Russia. Above all else Lenin wanted to keep what had been won during the months of 1917. Therefore the Cheka was given effectively a free rein in Russia. Someone’s occupation or the size/value of their house could be enough to seal their fate.

The work done during the Red Terror also received support from a leading Bolshevik – [Gregory Zinoviev](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/gregory_zinoviev.htm). He said that the enemies of the Bolshevik government should be “annihilated”. Lenin himself wrote to Dzerzhinsky that the opponents of the Bolshevik government should be made “to tremble”.

Given that the future USSR was in chaos in 1918 and that the work was done by the secret police, it is hard to find accurate figures of those who suffered during the Red Terror. If it was done to make people “tremble” then there is a chance that the figures were exaggerated simply to scare potential opponents into acquiescence. It is thought that between 10,000 to 15,000 people were summarily executed by the Cheka between September and October 1918 in areas under the formal control of the Bolsheviks – such figures were published in official journals and openly publicized. As there were no public trials, such figures cannot be verified. However, it is thought that the figures for summary executions in areas previously under the control of the Whites were far higher than 15,000. Lenin himself gave the order for the execution of 50,000 in the Crimea alone and some include these figures as part of the “Red Terror” as opposed to being the end result of the Russian Civil War.

The Red Terror resulted in the execution of thousands of men classified as “bandits”. However, the term never had a legal definition and it seems very likely that it became a one-word fits all to explain the arrest and then execution of suspects. Those who harbored the thousands of deserters from the Red Army were arrested and punished as they were branded “bandits”. This meant that many families suffered as the result of just one member of it defying the law.

**Primary source:**

#### [Walter Duranty](https://spartacus-educational.com/USAdurantyW.htm), [*I Write As I Please*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Walter+Duranty%2C+Write+As+I+Please&rh=n%3A266239%2Ck%3AWalter+Duranty%5Cc+Write+As+I+Please)(1935)

“The fear of the Cheka was so great those early days in Moscow that people made a detour rather than step on the sidewalk in front of its main building on Lubyanka Square.

With some difficulty I secured a copy of the pamphlet in question, which I think was written in the latter part of 1918 or early 1919. It explained in simple, lucid terms the principles by which the Red Terror was directed. The chief purpose, the writer said, was to strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of the Revolution; therefore action must be ruthless and, above all, swift. The destruction of enemies without delay might often, by paralyzing opposition, save many more lives later. Secrecy was also stressed, because that, too, was an element of terror. For this reason Cheka arrests almost always were made in the dead of night and the relatives and friends of arrested persons generally heard no more of them for weeks. Perhaps they would then be released; more commonly there would be a notification that clothing or food might be provided on a given date for Citizen So-and-so, who had been sentenced to a term of exile; sometimes a curt notice of execution.

The Terror, as such, no longer existed when I went to Moscow, although people still spoke in whispers of the night of the attempt on Lenin's life when 500 people were executed without trial in Moscow, not because they were guilty of complicity, but because they were former nobles, landlords, bankers or generals, and as such were "class enemies" whose "execution" was carried out as an example and warning. In the official history of the Russian Communist Party, written by Popof in 1931, the facts are bluntly stated. "The system of mass Red Terror proved a weapon of tremendous importance. It came down with all its severity upon the heads of the landlord and bourgeois counter-revolutionaries; on the White officers, big Tsarist officials, and the most prominent figures among the nobility, the clergy and the capitalists." Although I was not in Russia at the time of the Kirov assassination in 1934, I have no reason to doubt that the executions which followed it were prompted by the same motives as in 1918; that is to say, that many of those shot were not implicated in the plot to assassinate Kirov, but were "hostile elements" whose elimination was meant to strike terror; it was not even an act of revenge, but a symbol and a warning.”