

It's an interesting coincidence that our conference is taking place at the same time when the 100th anniversary of the beginning of Red terror is being remembered in Russia, as the decree 'On Red Terror' was signed by Lenin on 5 September 1918. The centennial of Red terror was especially lively remembered by Russian oppositioners who are trying to draw parallels between then and now. But I'm personally not so sure that we could match systematic killing of hundreds of thousands with the political repressions in Putin's Russia, which look rather mild if we are comparing it with the Red terror during the Russian Civil War.

Well, we are currently celebrating very actively the 100th anniversary of Estonian independence, but not so many people in Estonia know that the 2018 is also the 100th anniversary of the Red and White terror in Estonia and in Latvia as well. For the beginning I'd like to make a short summary of these events in the Baltics, because they are rather forgotten nowadays and are largely overshadowed by the Stalinist terror of the 1940's and 1950's. In the end I would like to say a few comments on Red and White terror.

Military conflicts that raged in the territory of the former Russian Empire between 1918 and 1921, significantly differed by its nature and the methods of warfare from the preceding world war, a conventional encounter between empires. This violence generally targeted the civilian population, as all the parties of the conflict were willing to use it in order to change the political behaviour of the civilian population. Politically motivated violence took drastic forms in Finland, where 2/3 of the casualties of the Finnish Civil War, were victims of Red or White Terror and in Russian Civil War, where the terror claimed up to two million human lives.

The Red terror in Latvia and Estonia had national and material connotations. The largest part of land estate in these countries had traditionally been belonging to the Baltic German nobility, while the majority of rural population lacked any land property. This made the "Agrarian question" the most urgent problem in these societies at the beginning of the 20th century. During the offensive of the Red Army many people in Estonia and Latvia also saw the arrival of the Red Army as an opportunity to take revenge on those viewed as responsible for their sufferings during the German occupation or to settle earlier personal scores. To execute their power, the Bolsheviks established special investigation commissions and tribunals. In Latvia more than 3,600 and in Estonia up to 700 people lost their lives in the Red Terror. The defeat of the Bolshevik regime in both countries, however, led to the White Terror campaign, in which more than 3,000 people lost their lives in retaliation in Latvia and up to 800 in Estonia.

Lithuania on the other hand became an "anomaly" in Soviet Westward offensives in 1918-1919, because there isn't any documental proof that anyone was killed for political reasons by the Lithuanian Bolshevik regime led by Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas. Lithuanian Bolsheviks introduced typical communist reforms, by nationalising the land and private property. However, the Bolshevik institutions of repression didn't carry out their typical activities in Lithuania. When the Red Army marched into Lithuania, local public life suffered little restrictions and everyday life basically continued as before the Soviet invasion, as Bolsheviks were aimed to obtain a favourable or at least passive reaction from the local population with their liberal politics in order to ease the Red Army's advance through Lithuania.

What was the purpose of the Red Terror? Did Bolsheviks wanted to break the resistance of their opponents or was it an instrument of a radical reformatting of society?

Both. Instead of promoting the program of social elevators and extensive reforms, after the seizure of power, Ulyanov suggested that revolutionaries should incite urban and rural marginals against the most cultured, successful, enterprising, independent groups of the population with the aim of physically destroying them and forcibly changing the structure of Russian society. In fact, it was about the extermination of part of the population by the communists on the basis of class, negative selection. And the same thing, of course in smaller scale took place in Estonia and in Latvia in 1918 and in 1919.

Despite all the mutual cruelties in Estonian and Latvian Wars of Independence, the leaders of the Nationalist Governments never set themselves a goal of destroying entire social groups or classes. They were not going to arrange negative selection, forcibly destroying the social structure of old society. The whites did not conquer their own country and did not seek to conserve a one-party dictatorship for decades. On the contrary. They were ready for compromises and were trying to find a common language with the workers and the peasants.

Therefore, white terror were cruel excesses. Red terror is not so much excesses but a thoughtful doctrine and purposeful policy. Its goal was the destruction of entire population groups (nobility, clergy, merchants, rural bourgeoisie) for the sake of creating a new "socialist" society.