

A visit to the “Red Terror” Martyrs Memorial Museum of Addis Ababa

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Museums are corridors into the past allowing a rear view mirror to see what the world was; and when one visits such museums emotions rekindle, and carries one away to the far past, and place him to judge history as “it is and as it was”.

The Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum of Addis Ababa has the eerie sensation of such feelings. The Red Terror Martyrs memorial museum is tucked away down at the corner on the Mesqel square that branch out to the Bole Airport. It is inside a mediocre building and can go almost unnoticed as one walks/drives to the Bole Airport. At the gate, there is a monument of a woman with two daughters with an under caption “Never, ever Again”? Nevertheless, one wonders, “Never, ever again” to what? I could not understand the caption though I have a vague understanding of it. The people at the reception table could not explain it either, except parroting the authorized version of the organizers. “An egregious atrocity and crime against humanity will never, ever again be repeated in our beloved country Ethiopia or on our planet for that matter” How do we stop such wickedness from happening? So, does “Never, ever again” means not to

rise against oppression and subjugation and expect a benign reaction from a ruling class? Red Terror was not and will not be the calling of the martyrs, but of the beaters. So, how do we change the heart of the beast so “crime against humanity will never, ever again” be repeated?

The “Never Again” motto belittles the struggle waged and what the museum presumably stands for. It wrongly presupposes the “red terror” should never have happened, but could not answer the question “how, not in an autocratic government?”

The martyrs willingly gave their life for what they believed in, and discretion for them was never the better part of valour as some in the spirit of Falstaff would decry. It was the ultimate price they paid for the freedom of their fellow citizens. They died once, but their scoffers die every minute. Was it Shakespeare who wrote cowards die many time before their deaths, the valiant never taste of death, but once? Yes, that is very true and in this sense it was not a museum they deserve, nor did they demand one anyways. What they deserve is a monument, and they are worthy of it. A monument in the likeness of the Miazia 23 square, or the Yekati 12 or even a street to their names. The victims were patriots that did not plead “guilty” in the manner of “Never again”. Those were heroes ready to repeat the same sacrifice as long as oppression and subjugation prevails. “Red Terror” is the natural response of a derelict fascist government to a genuine and honest uprising of oppressed people. Could one ask a more “humane” terror from fascist tugs? The caption is purposely crafted to give an impression that the “Red Terror” will not be repeated because now prevails the right to opine ones view without any fear of intimidation, but is that true. At the exit and to bump up such a notion, there are pictures of EPDRF forces taking over the palace marking the “end” of tyranny.

The main entrance to the museum leads to a small reception table. A receptionist gives visitors a receipt with a number on it; I guess that serves as a counter. To the left of the reception room, there is a small compartment partially packed with the 1953 coup d'état pictures. The coordinators have in mind that the history of the “Red Terror” begins from the 1953 coup d'état. Why the association marked the date from the coup d'état, and how the coup d'état could fall under the category of the “Red Terror” is not clear. What is clear and visibly written on the wall is that the planners have twisted logic to classify the event under the general category of “Red Terror”, unless they meant it as a prelude to the terror period. For the organizers, the “red terror” victims were “extra judicial” killings, but what they missed is all “extra judicial” killings cannot

be classified under “red terror” victims. The gaffes were not so much a failure of understanding as they were a failure of integrity. For an honest and non-color blinded person, it was not that difficult to make out the terror, for it came with a color, the color of red. Needless to say, three seems to be a veiled motive to obfuscate the victim party with this deliberate mumbo-jumbo misclassification. It is to belittle what that generation paid for the country, and exonerate the perpetrators by spreading every extra judicial killing over regimes, religious groups, and parties. And the most sublime and subtle way to do this is to put all “extra judicial” killings in one basket. Otherwise, what logic is there to house OLF and Woyane victims under the same shade with the “Red Terror” victims? What is the purpose of lodging OLF and Woyane victims with the Red Terror Martyrs, and then decorating the coffins with flags and graveside flowers, unless it is to dwarf the heroes and emulate the villains. The footer under the coffins (the longest caption in the museum) reads as follows,

“In 1987 the derg regime took 30 individuals it suspected of being members of the TPLF and some who were taken to be OLF members. In broad day light it strangled them. They were taken from what was then known as “Bermuda” (a secret detention center) and central investigation prison. Their bodies were transported to Kotebe security center. This is where they were found. Their families thought it best their remains rest in this museum.”

The murder was injustice, and nobody should be killed without due process of the law, but again the victims were neither “martyrs” nor their death fall under the category of “Red Terror”. Likewise, the killings of Jehovah witness fall under the same category like that of Woyane and OLF victims. Their killing happened during the Red Terror period and was as such a “collateral damage” of the terror operation. It is naive, however, to say that the Jehova witnesses, OLF or TPLF were the prime targets of the Red Terror campaign.

In the same room where the coffins of the 30 victims were laid, a poster is hanged that says..”ታሪካችሁ ህያው ነው” . An honest observer of history will not be blindsided with this aphorism, for where were the OLF and Woyane during the Red Terror period anyways.

In the second room, one could see a copy of Mengistu’s letter to execute the sixty Haile Sellasie’s officials. Again, it looks like the same deliberate faux pas. While it is true that the

killings were extra-judicial, the victims were not the “Red Terror” casualties. Every killing was not a red terror act, dummies. Terror is real and active force in history, but the red terror had a political target, a time frame, and was ideological driven. The whole nation has witnessed this terror storm. It was a cataclysmic terrorist attack culminating in mass killing by a government on its citizens.

In the second room, one could note a copy of “*Strike*” and “*Struggle*” in a glass box, and inside another glass box there are two books, “*Melkam Seife Nebelbal*” and “*Alweledem*” of Abe Gubegna; otherwise, the room is just vacant. At the foyer, there is also an AK47 with a military helmet in a glass showcase.

Going into the third room, one could note few large sized pictures, among which Mengistu smashing a bottle filled with red liquid is prominent. Of all the pictures, this is the only caption where the description of the picture names the EPRP by name and it reads as follows,

“Mengistu declared EPRP (the opposition party) as ‘the enemy of the state’. He further went on to play tragic-comical act of throwing a bottle filled with blood like liquid in front of huge crowd auguring the wanton slaughter of innocents soon to come”

Of all things to be preserved, the coordinators have opted to preserve the “bottle filled with blood like liquid” in a free standing glass showcase, probably to mark “the day that will live in infamy” as Roosevelt puts it.

On the right hand side, one could see a copy of an arrest order to detain 755 wanted young men and woman whose pictures are attached with the order. On the left side, there is a picture of Legesse making a speech. In the same room, one could see a copy of the death order for a young boy, and in the corner, there is an unearthed “Adferis” duplicating machine, but the caption does not say what it was printing, and for which party. Is this a deliberate faux pas or accidental oversight?

In the next room, one could see in a standing rectangular glass showcase a T-Shirt worn by a survivor and pictures of victims with the usual tag of “ቀይ ሽብር ይፋፋምብን”. In another glass cabinet, one could see also the torture tools (handcuffs, whips, shackles, pincers of various sizes, strings..etc) used by the victimizers. On the wall, there are various pictures of victims and

paintings. When one walks into the next room, one could see four standing glass display cases stuffed with clothes unearthed from burial sites. If there is any emotion meant to be created, it is unquestionably here. In the corner in a standing glass cabinet, one could see skulls and bones of victims. In the room, there is also an artistic presentation of a pair of feet, one full and the other broken inside a glass display case. One could see also AK-47 and pistols in another glass cabinet. In the corner, there is an artist visualization of the main prison of Addis Ababa and its inmates. One could also see a graphic model presentation of tortures types used by the fascist thugs. Hanged on the wall, there are drawings that depict and capture the letter and spirit of death as it hovers the country. Under the shade of two flags, there are six open coffins with unearthed clothes and shoes of the martyrs.

This room leads to the exit room. In the exit room, there are notes left by visitors. Some comments posted on a table more or less laud the EPDRF for stopping the red terror. How and when did the EPDRF stopped the red terror is not clear. Others comments on the “visitors” section narrates diverse views. One could also read very touching comments from relatives and friends of the victims. In the reception room, there is a picture of the late Melese Zenawi putting the corner stone of the Museum, and the date reads Ginbot 20, 1986. In the exit room, there are notices for donations of printed materials and a donation box.

What is missing?

To begin with, the museum’s name is a misnomer. If it is worthy of the name, then it should strictly reflect the period that spanned the red terror era. Moreover, there should not be any mix-up on what the Red terror signifies. The red terror had a time frame and stretching the term to include others, or even stretching it backward in time would just lose its sense. Unfortunately, the museum gives the idea that the red terror was in place right from the time of the emperor, and just stops with the coming of the EPDRF. It moreover includes the “Red Terror Martyrs” from different shades of political parties. This is a wrong assumption, therefore, a wrong conclusion.

A museum is a place where exhibits and artifacts of the past are on display. If so, how come one only sees a single copy of Democracia, with ripped headline title? Why would not the organizers display full copies of Democracia? Why would not there be a library stuffed with books, newspapers, leaflets, periodicals published during the time? There is a store in the museum with two book titles, and strange enough one of the book was written by a Woyane and talks more about TPLF than the martyrs. How come there is no copy of “To kill a generation” Or narrate the story of “Y” from the book? How come the association failed to write names of the martyrs, if they failed to get pictures? Why would the organizers “compel” visitors to have an impression that those killed were few, probably whose few pictures were on the wall? Why would not the organizers geographically depict areas where such atrocities were committed? How on earth, visitors could not find pictures of the butchers of Gonder, Addis Ababa, Jimma, Harar, Bahridar..etc. Where is Ali Mussa, Tefera Melaku, etc? Where are their pictures? The killers’ picture should have been hanged along with the victims to show visitors who the killers were. It is not enough to charge, and even blame the Derg collectively, or even to hang their pictures while on trial. The Derg had a face and a name on it, and need to be told and retold who these members were and depicted “as they are”, the butchers of Ethiopia.

I went from room to room to find names of my brother and friends, but there were none. I broadened my search and tried to find those who killed in Bahirdar, Awassa, Jimma, Diredawa, there was none. I went to the cities of Bahirdar, Awassa, Jimma, Diredawa to find something that was left to their name, there was none. Their names and deeds have gone into oblivion. I came back to Addis and saw two ex-Derg members strolling on Bole Street and then they stopped to sip coffee near the museum. I felt the mockery, but then can one truly say these executioners “served their sentence”?

It is a travesty for the patriots and an insult to the remnants to house a museum in a cave like non descript building, and allow the gigantic *Tiglachin* monument to stand on the main street of Addis. The butchers’ monument dwarfs the red terror victims’ museum in size and architecture. What about the monuments in Mekele, Bahridar and Nazreth. Are the victims of the Red Terror any less in stature and contribution? But then, we the left behind rhyme with Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55,

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Across the Pushkin square, there is a square named after the Austrian actor and philanthropist, Karlheinz Böhm, founder of *Menschen für Menschen*. If the square by any means signifies appreciation to what the gentleman did, so be it, but he has not made any history. History was made by the victims whose bones and skulls spread throughout the country. These are the ones who deserve a square and a street to their names.

The mockery turns into charade, when I could not find a single street or square with names of the red terror victims while the streets are abound with foreign dignitary names. Should not the many artists and scientists deserve recognition? How come one lauds Pushkin and forgets Baelu Girma or Tsegaye GebreMedhin. How come one names the streets and squares with names of Churchill and De gualle and forgets about Atse Yohannes?

Truth will eventually shine and will stand witness not only to what is true, but to vilify what is false. As the African saying goes “A well tracked long distance is better than a less travelled shortest path”, and when truth finally excel the martyrs will be glorified in the minds and hearts of the people whom they sacrificed their precious life.

Not long ago, there was a heated discussion by the “loyal” oppositions, to set up a monument for the “white terror” victims and latter corrected it to set up a monument irrespective of “color”. The idea was propounded by none other than butcher’s loyal Shengo member, Hailu Araya and the errand boy, Lidetu Ayalew. And we tell these scum “Pray thee cease thy counsel, which falls into mine (ours) ears as profitless as water in sieve”. When it comes to the history of the “Red Terror”, the victims are the “plaintiff and the judge”.