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Between Spain and Russia: The long shadow of the Soviet Cheka and its use in propaganda in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s as well as during the Spanish Civil War

During the Spanish Civil War, a whole series of centres referred to as "committees" emerged in the Republican rear guard. These were very different from each other and assumed different attributes previously monopolized by the state. The most prominent functions, and for which these centres have been better known, were repressive and judicial. Pro-Francoist propaganda referred to this heterogeneous set of centres as Chekas, clearly seeing them as an heir to the repressive Soviet state-security organization.[1] The aim of this essay is to examine the Russian Cheka (understood as the Soviet political police) and the Spanish centres that received that name. Through an analysis of these centres' systems of internal organization and of the repressive methods used, I intend to demonstrate the essential differences between the kind of violence practiced by both historical phenomena.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first one briefly describes the Soviet political police, the Cheka, outlines how it was organized and how it worked internally, alluding to the repressive aspects and logic of the violence that it exercised in revolutionary Russia. After this succinct analysis. the essay will proceed to discuss what news was disseminated in Spain about this institution through various newspapers. The paper will then explain the context in which the committees that carried out repressive measures during the first six months of the Spanish conflict came to light. Finally, it will proceed to study the main characteristics of the violence exerted in the Republican zone by these centres. In this way, it will be shown that the use of the term Cheka, as applied in the Spanish context, simply served as a propaganda tool for the insurgents against the Republic, which was aimed at the European democratic powers with the objective of creating a common ideology that identified the supporters of the Republic as an enemy who deserved to be annihilated.

The Bolshevik Cheka and its shadow over Spain

On 7 (20) December 1917, the Cheka or Commission was created by order of the Bolshevik Party. The name Cheka was taken from the abbreviation of its name, "Vserossiyskaya Cherezvitchainaya komissiya po bor'by s kontr'revoliutsii, spekuliatsei

1 This work draws on previous works that allude to the critique of the Cheka concept in the case of the Spanish Civil War. Some examples were from the historians Hugo García, José Luis Ledesma, Julius Ruiz, and Jiří Chalupa.

i sabotagem", in English, the "All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage". This new apparatus guided the Bolsheviks' process for establishing power since it was created *to suppress and liquidate any act or attempted act of counterrevolutionary activity or sabotage, whatever its origin, anywhere on Russian soil; to bring all saboteurs and counterrevolutionaries before a revolutionary court*.[2] Therefore, the Commission was created and protected by the state. It was assigned a wide variety of functions by the government so that it could fulfil its tasks. It also enjoyed great levels of autonomy from the rest of the authorities, so it wielded great power and influence. However, this institution always had to answer to the government, more specifically to the Bolshevik Party, and it always maintained a strong hierarchical structure.

Lenin installed a trusted man at the head of the Commission – Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926), better known as Iron Felix. Dzerzhinsky organized the process of forming and establishing Cheka centres in other Russian localities while controlling all its functions from Moscow.[3] In addition, in a short period of time, the organization expanded its functions, so that it no longer restricted itself to repression. Its functions also included spying on the enemy and even judging defendants through its own courts. This was a complex task bearing in mind that Russia was mired into a civil conflict with an unstable government that had just come to power.

Due to its extraordinary nature, as reflected in its name, it was closed in 1922 and was replaced immediately by the GPU (State Political Directorate), while maintaining the same headquarters and the same personnel. Even Dzerzhinsky continued in his position until his death. Therefore, the term Cheka only alluded to the beginning of this organization, which ended its operations as the KGB, 69 years after the Cheka had been shut down.

Nonetheless, the impact of this institution and the functions it carried out lasted in Europe, allowing for the term Cheka to be used in 1936 by Francoist propaganda to allude to the repressive functions carried out by political and trade union organizations in the republican rear guard, without making distinctions about whether these organizations were communist, anarchist, or socialist. Historians have not come up with a unanimous definition of what the "cheka" was in Spain. According to the historian Javier Cervera Gil, the chekas were *the premises of clandestine prisons of political or union organizations where simulated trials were held*. In his work, the same author used the definition given in his day by the American journalist and writer Peter Wyden, who maintained that the word cheka in Spain *was used to make reference to the tribunals that simulated the trials*.[4]

2 WERTH, Nicolas: *Un Estado Contra su Pueblo. Violencia, Temores y Represiones en la Unión Soviética*, p. 58 (Edición electronica, 2011) – see https://es.scribd.com/document/74215218/Nicolas-Werth-Un-Estado-Contra-Su-Pueblo (quoted version dated 22. 11. 2020).

3 PATTERSON, Jane Michelle: *Moscow Chekists During Civil War, 1918–1921* (Doctoral thesis). Simon Fraser University, Burnbary 1991, pp. 35–36.

4 CERVERA GIL, Javier: *Madrid en guerra. La ciudad clandestina, 1936–1939*. Alianza, Madrid 2006, p. 64.

In the Spanish case, the press was one of vehicles of information that kept alive the memory of the Cheka. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, newspapers published several news items featuring the Cheka and its successors (the GPU and OGPU in the 1920s, the NKVD in the 1930s).[5] However, although the Commission changed its name several times, the newspapers studied continued to use the term Cheka.[6] These newspapers paid special attention to stories of violence, publishing news of killings allegedly carried out by this institution or executions of exiled leaders, such as Leon Trotsky,[7] General Alexander Kutepov (Kutiepoff), the leader of the ROVS (Russian All-Military Union) White exile organization, and the murders of French president Paul Doumer (1932) or the head of the Communist Party organization in Leningrad, Sergei Kirov (1934).[8] News about collective executions was also collected, mentioning the total number of people killed and the social groups more likely to be executed by the Commission, such as church members and the affluent classes.

In the case of the church, there is no talk of the destruction of temples, but of the attacks suffered by the religious personnel of this country, accused, in general, of

5 OGPU (Joint State Political Directorate), NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). For a general assessment of the Soviet political police see PERSAK Krzysztof – KAMIŃSKI, Łukasz (eds.): *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe. 1944–1989*. IPN, Warsaw 2005.

6 The newspapers consulted were *ABC*, *El Imparcial*, *El Sol*, *El Heraldo de Madrid*, *El Liberal*, *La Libertad*, *La Voz* (all from Madrid), *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), and *ABC* (Sevilla). I have proceeded to analyse the news that arrived in Spain through the newspapers that introduced, either in the headline or in the content of the news, the terms Tcheka, Cheka or Checa from 1917 to 1936, that is, between the year in which the Russian Cheka was established and the period when the Spanish committees that were given this name by pro-Franco propaganda were at their height and enjoyed the greatest autonomy. The search has been limited to these terms to ascertain what news was revealed about this institution with the objective of analysing the perceptions that were published about it, because it will generally show what was projected on the Spanish committees when resorting to the term Cheka to describe them and define their functions.

7 *ABC* (Madrid), 12. 1. 1924, p. 21; 8. 1. 1925, p. 24; 3. 9. 1926, p. 3; 22. 8. 1929, p. 27; *El Sol*, 27. 1. 1924, p. 5; *La Libertad*, 27. 1. 1924, p. 1; 22. 8. 1929, p. 1; 18. 12. 1929, p. 1; *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 28. 1. 1924, p. 1; 25. 12. 1924, p. 1; 18. 9. 1928, p. 3; 21. 8. 1929, p. 11; *El Sol*, 22. 8. 1929, p. 5; *La Vanguardia*, 24. 12. 1924, p. 20; 28. 3. 1925, p. 20; 7. 5. 1925, p. 19; 18. 11. 1927, p. 19; 1. 2. 1928, p. 5; *La Voz*, 20. 5. 1924, p. 3. As the reader can see, no reliable news of Soviet Russia arrived in Spain. Moreover, in the Spanish press, repeated news stories appeared about the alleged murder of Trotsky throughout the 1920s. The same applies in the case of Kutepov (the information found on this person only clarified that he was a general in the White Army and that he had to go into exile after the Russian Civil War). Numerous rumours were published in the Spanish press as real news. AVILÉS FARRÉ, Juan: *La fe que vino de Rusia. La revolución bolchevique y los españoles (1917–1931)*. Biblioteca Nueva-UNED, Madrid 1999, p. 45.

8 The case of Kutepov was discussed in *ABC* (Madrid), 4. 2. 1930, p. 30; 26. 3. 1930, p. 38; 28. 12. 1930, p. 58; *La Libertad*, 21. 2. 1930, p. 7; *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 18. 2. 1930, p. 11; *El Sol*, 26. 3. 1930, p. 5. For the murder of Paul Doumer *ABC* (Madrid), 7. 5. 1932, p. 22; 15. 5. 1932, p. 56; 21. 5. 1932, p. 43; *La Libertad*, 31. 5. 1932, p. 1. In the case of Sergei Kirov, *ABC* (Madrid), 16. 12. 1934, p. 22; 25. 12. 1934, p. 15. In the case of the execution of Monsignor Konstanty Romuald Budkiewicz (a Catholic priest in charge of organizing nonviolent resistance against the first Soviet antireligious campaign in 1923), *ABC* (Madrid), 30. 3. 1923, p. 17; 28. 4. 1923, p. 17; *El Sol*, 17. 4. 1923, p. 1. Other murders with which the Cheka was linked were those of Ahmed Cemal Bajá (one of the three Pashas who held power in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War), *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 29. 7. 1922, p. 4; *La Vanguardia*, 30. 7. 1922, p. 19; or one of the brothers of Tsar Nicholas II, Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovitch (1918), in *La Voz*, 3. 2. 1922, p. 1.

being counterrevolutionary.[9] The same accusation was directed towards the upper class.[10] Another of the social groups that received special attention were so-called intellectuals,[11] and to a lesser extent, personnel within the party,[12] opponents,[13] personnel at the service of the state, peasants and workers.[14]

One of the earliest assessments of religious victims was published by the *ABC* newspaper in 1923 when it said that 28 bishops and 1,200 priests had been executed between 1919 and 1920. This figure would rise in subsequent counts, as in 1927 when the same paper said that more than one million people had been executed. Based on the book *Historia de la GPU* by Essad Bey,[15] *ABC* published the figures offered by this author, which amount to 1,760,065 people between 1917 and 1923, including 25 bishops, 1,215 priests, 6,575 teachers, 8,800 doctors, 54,850 officers, and a large number of soldiers, policemen, civil servants, intellectuals and thousands of peasants and workers. The last overall count that appears in this newspaper is from Ramiro de Maeztu, who calculated in an article that more than 1,800,000 people had executed by the Cheka, 400,000 of them "intellectuals".[16] However, not all newspapers offered exact figures of executions, but limited themselves to offering speculation, with terms such as "thousands" or "numerous" in reference to arrests, summary trials, and executions, or with lines like *every day, hundreds of individuals are killed by the bullets of the Tcheka's executioners*.[17]

Although news regarding violent acts by members of the Cheka was the most abundant example, it was not the only thing that was reported. There were also references to other roles exercised by the Chekists, e.g. espionage, organizing protests (strikes and demonstrations), internal reforms (such as how the Cheka became the GPU, later the OGPU and finally the NKVD), and changes of directors. But these media also echoed the spread of the Cheka to other countries, i.e., how other states or other political parties incorporated a political police force based on the Soviet model. Thus, there were "chekas" in the Nazi Party before it came to power, in the fascist

9 *ABC* (Madrid), 28. 6. 1927, p. 36; 20. 3. 1935, p. 30; *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 27. 12. 1928, p. 3; 24. 1. 1930, p. 3; 1. 4. 1930, p. 3; *La Vanguardia*, 27. 3. 1921, p. 14; 9. 1. 1925, p. 16; 15. 12. 1926, p. 22.

10 *ABC* (Madrid), 26. 4. 1923, p. 6; 5. 11. 1929, p. 28; 20. 3. 1935, p. 30; *La Vanguardia*, 14. 8. 1929, p. 3; *La Voz*, 15. 8. 1929, p. 2.

11 *La Vanguardia*, 29. 2. 1936, p. 5.

12 *ABC* (Madrid), 26. 12. 1924, p. 7; 8. 1. 1925, p. 24; 5. 2. 1929, p. 35; 12. 6. 1932, p. 38; 20. 3. 1935, p. 30.

13 *El Sol*, 19. 4. 1934, p. 7; *La Vanguardia*, 11. 3. 1922, p. 15; 13. 12. 1924, p. 24; 23. 10. 1929, p. 30; 23. 7. 1933, p. 24; *La Voz*, 19. 12. 1922, p. 1; 12. 11. 1935, p. 2.

14 *ABC* (Madrid), 13. 9. 1923, p. 19; 6. 7. 1927, p. 20; 6. 4. 1930, p. 33; 18. 9. 1930, p. 30; 26. 11. 1930, p. 33; 20. 3. 1935, p. 30; *El Sol*, 22. 4. 1925, p. 5; *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 6. 12. 1929, p. 3, 17. 9. 1930, p. 3; *La Vanguardia*, 6. 10. 1922, p. 11; 6. 2. 1923, p. 21; 11. 5. 1923, p. 14; 11. 9. 1923, p. 20; 11. 6. 1927, p. 22; 23. 7. 1927, p. 20; *La Voz*, 13. 9. 1923, p. 4; 24. 12. 1927, p. 5.

15 BEY, Essad: *La policía secreta de los soviets. Historia de la G.P.U. (1917–1933)*. Espasa Calpe, Madrid 1935.

16 *ABC* (Madrid), 24. 3. 1923, p. 17; 21. 12. 1927, p. 6; 26. 8. 1934, p. 35. The number of people executed/killed by the Cheka offered by Ramiro de Maeztu appeared on 10. 4. 1936, p. 15.

17 "Thousands" in *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 7. 11. 1927, p. 9; 9. 11. 1929, p. 11. "Numerous" in *ABC* (Madrid), 22. 5. 1924, p. 21; 16. 7. 1924, p. 19; *El Sol*, 22. 5. 1924, p. 5; *El Imparcial*, 22. 5. 1924, p. 1; *La Voz*, 21. 5. 1924, p. 7. The quotation marks corresponding to executions of hundreds correspond to *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 16. 4. 1923, p. 1.

Italy of Mussolini, in Greece, Argentina, and China. In the Italian case, such was the force of the rumours following the assassination of the socialist Giacomo Matteotti (1924) claiming that the fascist regime had a "cheka", even Mussolini himself had to proclaim in various speeches his distaste for the Russian Cheka and its ways, while maintaining that in Italy there was no institution with these ends.[18]

Also in the Spanish case, news was published in the press that informed of the debate on this institution that was used as a political weapon by the conservatives in the years of the Second Republic, mainly to discredit socialist collectives. The first reference alludes to a conference held by the Unión Local de Sindicatos de Toledo (Local Labour Union of Toledo) in this city on 26 December 1932, at four in the afternoon. At the end of the conference, a question time was opened and Angelo Bonirelli (who is said to have been an Italian anarchist) asked about the role of the army and the political police in Russia, something that the communists in attendance did not like. Consequently, Bonirelli had to be escorted from the premises before a possible fight broke out. The second reference to the term "cheka" in the 1930s concerned a group of editors of *El Imparcial*, which used it against their editor-in-chief, whom they accused, through a letter sent to various newspapers, such as *ABC*, of being an "authentic mandarin of the Tcheka press with which he dreams". It would be the first time that this term was used to describe the Spanish situation, understanding cheka as a repressive body led by a leader who cannot be contradicted, and who must only be obeyed. Later, the "cheka" was used as a comparative reference for the use of force and methods of coercion by the state when confronted by the events of Casas Viejas, cataloguing it as the "true class aristocracy" in comparison with the Spanish forces of public order. The last reference for Spain with regard to the Cheka was on 27 June 1936, one month before the coup d'état of 17 July. It was used in relation to the debate on the ratification and extension of the amnesty decree in Congress for political prisoners imprisoned during the radical-cedista biennium. In one of his interventions, the deputy of CEDA,[19] Juan Bautista Guerra García, maintained that, contrary to the decree, there were cases of mistreatment of detainees in the detention centres and "actions that can already be categorized as Cheka [in nature]", a statement that produced various protests from the legislators of the Popular Front,[20] and the minister of justice, Manuel Blasco Waiter, urged him to provide examples, which he ulti-

18 The exportation of the Cheka idea: Italy: *ABC* (Madrid), 4. 1. 1925, p. 21; 6. 1. 1925, p. 22; *El Imparcial*, 28. 12. 1924, p. 1; *El Sol*, 25. 6. 1924, p. 5; 3. 4. 1925, p. 8; 12. 6. 1925, p. 5; *La Libertad*, 24. 7. 1924, p. 3; 26. 7. 1924, p. 1; *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 14. 11. 1924, p. 1; 5. 1. 1925, p. 1; 28. 10. 1932, p. 1; *La Voz*, 24. 6. 1924, p. 5; 5. 1. 1925, p. 1; *La Vanguardia*, 20. 6. 1924, p. 14; 7. 12. 1924, p. 17. Germany: *ABC* (Madrid), 4. 10. 1923, p. 25; *El Sol*, 12. 4. 1932, p. 1; 1. 3. 1933, p. 8; *La Voz*, 11. 4. 1932, p. 1; 23. 7. 1934, p. 3; *La Vanguardia*, 11. 2. 1925, p. 17; 18. 6. 1930, p. 23; 20. 5. 1936, p. 32. Greece: *El Sol*, 6. 2. 1926, p. 5. Argentina: *El Heraldo de Madrid*, 16. 9. 1931, p. 1. China: *La Vanguardia*, 3. 5. 1927, p. 26; 7. 5. 1927, p. 22; 10. 5. 1927, p. 28; 29. 2. 1927, p. 24.

19 The Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights), more commonly CEDA, was a Spanish political party in the Second Spanish Republic.

20 The Popular Front was a coalition of Republican and workers' leftist parties that won the February 1936 elections. This coalition resulted in a Republican government led by Santiago Casares Quiroga until the coup d'état that same year.

mately did not do, but everything seems to indicate that it alluded to the supposed persecution of the right by the Popular Front government. It should not be forgotten that the Falange was banned at the time.[21] In any case, of the four references, two of them discussed the idea that, during the mandates of the left in Spain, the forces of order became a kind of political police that violated the law to favour themselves politically, and repressed political collectives that did not think like them.

Coup d'état, war, and revolution. The revolutionary committees of Madrid

The war in Spain began on 17 July 1936, when a group of soldiers revolted in the Moroccan Protectorate. In the following days, this uprising extended to peninsular garrisons with the support of civilians and security bodies with similar interests to those of the insurgent military forces. The coup did not triumph throughout the Spanish state thanks to the efforts of citizens in arms (not all citizens, but workers' collectives from the left, or people who were simply sympathizers of the Republic) and segments of army personnel and state security bodies that supported the government. In this process of defeating coup forces, the state lost its monopoly over various areas, including those related to justice and public order. The exercising of these functions was assumed by the committees that emerged as a result of the coup d'état in an improvised way to combat the coup plotters and their civilian support. It was an unexpected situation that led a large portion of left-wing groups to improvise answers that would help defeat the coup and initiate a revolutionary process. These committees emerged mainly within the headquarters of leftist workers' parties and unions (anarchists, socialists, and communists). Therefore, centres of local activity such as libertarian athenaeums, communist radio stations, socialist circles and groups, and houses of the people,[22] became spaces of power with the capacity to impose their will in the areas where they were implanted and in nearby sectors. From the committees, answers were improvised to the situations that occurred as a result of the coup d'état.

Although the tasks related to repression were the ones that had a greater transcendence, these organs also intervened in the seizure and distribution of food and materials, in the organization and defence of their own spaces and the adjoining ones, and organized cooperatives.[23] In summary, the committees, which had been constituted in an autonomous and improvised manner, assumed a series of functions

21 *ABC* (Madrid), 27. 12. 1932, p. 36; 17. 1. 1933, p. 31; 15. 3. 1933, p. 30; 27. 6. 1936, pp. 23–25. The Spanish Falange was a fascist court party that was established in 1934. Its top leader was José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who was arrested along with the entire leadership of the party after being banned. When the coup d'état took place, he was a prisoner in Alicante, where he was shot on 20 November 1936.

22 All these spaces were part of the Spanish working tradition. They were centres for meeting and debate, as well as for the formation and acquisition of worker consciousness. Along with political propaganda, theatrical evenings, choirs, and reading groups were organized and, most importantly, schools for children and adults were created. In short, these centres were spaces for the socialization of workers from a particular town or neighbourhood. Each type of space was in relation to a political organization or labour union, although its members did not have because military in it.

23 *Archivo General e Histórico de la Defensa de Madrid* (AGHD), Fondo Madrid, Summary 61130, file 6109.

that were legitimized from the point of view of the citizens who supported them. The distribution of food and goods or exercising the justice "of the people" gave them great popular support, which in turn allowed them to dispute the space with the state and with the other rival centres.

The committees were very heterogeneous, both in terms of personnel and functions. Each centre had its own structure and assumed various tasks depending on what this structure was. The Madrid committees were formed from members and militants of organizations, in most cases, workers' organizations, who were already settled in the area. We refer to centres with a political character, like the socialist groups and the communist radio stations, or with a cultural or social mission, both of which apply to the libertarian athenaeums, the socialist circles, and the houses of the people.[24] However, these spaces were not the only ones that joined the revolutionary process. Members of these organizations who were present in small local institutions, distant from the central power, like the local government of small towns near the capital, created committees in the old seats of state power with all the left-wing political forces present in the towns being represented. An example was the committee that was constituted in Villa de Vallecas, a committee for an anti-fascist alliance, in which all the leftist parties and unions present in the town joined forces.[25]

Because the revolutionary committee and the political or social centre (a house of the people, an athenaeum, or a communist radio station) shared headquarters and members, the Francoist sources linked the fate of the second to the first. Everything was violence for the Franco regime. In this way, all those people who had an active political militancy, whether it be in social, cultural, or political matters, were punished, even when their militancy was very distant from the violence of the people on the committees. Although all the people who were part of the committees were members of these centres, not all members of the centres took part in the committees, and, therefore, they did not use direct violence against the detainees. They were collaborators in the sense that they knew what was happening in those places and did not intercede in the fate of the detainees.

This process of parallel justice or "by consensus" carried out by members of these centres, was characterized by the search for immediacy in the verdict and compliance with the sentence.[26] Everything seems to indicate that no trials took place inside these premises, but that suspects were detained who had been the subject of a previous complaint or whose right-wing attitude was known to members of these centres. Another way to obtain information about the suspects was to tap sources of information, such as a doorman, who knew the political affinities of their neighbours. A detention would result in the detainee's relatives going to the centre to ascertain the status of their loved ones and to present guarantees given by neighbours in their community that showed that the allegations were unfounded. From there, those

24 *Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica de Salamanca* (CDMH), PS-Madrid, Box 1019, Document 3.
25 *AGHD*, Fondo Madrid, Summary 61130, file 6109.
26 CERVERA GIL, Javier: *Contra el Enemigo de la República... desde la ley. Detener, juzgar y encarcelar en guerra.* Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid 2015, pp. 124–128.

responsible for these centres discussed what resolution to take with respect to the detainee. He could be considered guilty and be executed, or transferred to official dependencies (prisons), or be released, with a guarantee from the centre, which did not exempt him from being arrested again by another centre with a different ideology.[27]

The arrest was usually carried out at the suspect's home by the "brigadillas".[28] There, a search would take place with the intention of finding material that inculpated him. Moreover, these searches were generally used to proceed with the seizure of goods, such as clothing for future donations or valuable materials, in order to sell them and use the profit to finance the activities of the centres, to pay the salaries of militiamen, or to send it to the central government to administer and finance the war with them.[29] Even a person released could be arrested again. Arrests were also made at checkpoints or by means of patrols. People who participated in this type of activity were tasked with carrying out surveillance of the neighbourhood and maintaining control. Therefore, not only did they patrol, they also requested documentation from people whom they considered suspicious. If it was thought that the person's documentation was not in order or false, they were transferred to these centres. Generally, this was done to evaluate the case more thoroughly and to gather evidence of the person's innocence or guilt.

Various intermediaries intervened in these processes of detention, transfer, and possible execution, and it was not just people who were part of the "brigadillas". The people who made up these "brigadillas" could resort to the aid or assistance of zone neighbours, who were in patrols and manning checkpoints. However, not all people at checkpoints or in patrols, or who belonged to these organizations, were responsible for the repressive activity of the centre, or guilty of committing some type of crime (as judged by the Franco regime).

The actions of the Republican Government

The diverse cabinets that succeeded each other throughout the summer-autumn of 1936 maintained a discreet presence on the street, now in the hands of the committees.[30] The state did not disappear or collapse,[31] but fought to reclaim its space in the public scene. In general, the members of the governments that were formed after the

27 PRESTON, Paul: *El Holocausto español. Odio y exterminio en la Guerra Civil y después*. Debate, Barcelona 2011, p. 375.

28 Groups of militiamen specialized in carrying out searches, arrests, and executions. One example was the brigade of the "Five Devils", who acted under the orders of the socialist committee of the association located in the Casa del Pueblo of Puente de Vallecas, Madrid.

29 *AGHD*, Fondo Madrid, Summary 49380, Box 2001, No. 5.

30 We refer to the cabinets formed by the Republican José Giral Pereira on 19 July 1936 and chaired by the socialist Largo Caballero. They were established on 6 September and November 4 of that year.

31 We say that the Republican state did not collapse because it did not disappear; it remained operational, although without effective control of the streets. However, this is one of the aspects that generates controversy in the study of the Spanish Civil War. There are authors who claim otherwise; that the state's coercive devices collapsed (CASANOVA, Julian: *España partida en dos. Breve historia de la Guerra Civil española*. Crítica, Barcelona 2013, p. 97). However, this is one of the multiple functions of a state.

coup rejected the violence carried out by the revolutionary micropowers. José Giral Pereira[32] and his cabinet carried out measures to control revolutionary violence and subject it to the will of the state in order to put a stop to it. However, the government never sought a direct confrontation with these centres, since it depended on the support of the political parties and unions, to which the members of the committees belonged, to defeat the insurgents. In turn, these micropowers never had the power to openly confront the state and take its place. One example was the city of Madrid, where no political or trade union force (at least at the beginning of the war) could impose itself on the others.

Among the measures of the first Republican government at war, were a large number of laws aimed at curbing revolutionary justice. It was prohibited to carry weapons of different calibres in the rear guard, as was the movement of vehicles at certain hours of the night (the principal time when the brigades and militias executed suspects outside the cities), and intervening in searches and detentions without authorization to do so. The laws were also designed to protect the potentially susceptible population from being detained or having to endure a search. For example, in the event that revolutionary forces requested a house search, the affected people could call a police station so that the police could arrive at their home and prevent the search. However, it is known that these measures were poorly respected by members of the committees. Likewise, the government did not press these micropowers for fear of causing confrontations and losing support. Along with these measures, the government carried out a campaign to discredit the committees and their repressive work through the radio and the press. Resorting to expressions such as "uncontrolled", the state intended to eliminate any hint of suspicion of collaboration with these local powers,[33] while distancing itself from them. Thus, the state did not appear to be immersed in these activities nor did it assume responsibility for them. Also, the use of this adjective was intended to show the illegitimacy of these centres to exercise such functions, since the state was solely responsible for their execution. Other groups, the committees, were blamed and held responsible for carrying out such work, and this was to the detriment of the Republican cause, which therefore presented a bad image to foreign powers. The government mainly blamed the direction of these centres on anarchists, something completely logical for the cabinet, given that it was the largest force in the Republican rear guard that was not integrated in the Popular Front, the government's base.[34] Moreover, they were "uncontrolled", because they were not forces subject to the will of the state. They acted autonomously.

32 José Giral Pereira (1879–1962) was a politician affiliated with the Izquierda Republicana who became president of the government after the coup d'état of 17 July 1936. He was in charge of his cabinet until September 6 of that year before the continuous military failures and generally bad situation in the rear.

33 RODRIGO, Javier: *Hasta la raíz. Violencia durante la guerra civil y la dictadura franquista*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid 2008, p. 26; LEDESMA, José Luis: "Una retaguardia al rojo. Las violencias en la zona republicana". In: ESPINOSA MAESTRE, Francisco (ed.): *Violencia Roja y Azul. España, 1936–1950*. Crítica, Barcelona 2010, pp. 192–198.

34 THOMAS, Maria: *La fe y la furia. Violencia anticlerical popular e iconoclastia en España, 1931–1936*. Comares, Granada 2014, p. 100.

However, the actions of these revolutionary committees were guided from within, so they never considered themselves uncontrolled or their repressive action as indiscriminate, i.e. they did not exercise random violence. An example of the internal control of these centres over their repressive work was in Villa de Vallecas.[35] One night, those manning checkpoints were warned of the existence of a phantom vehicle that was firing shots on the militias. The sentries who were informed included one who had organized the committee on the town square. After a while, a vehicle appeared, going at high speed in the direction of the town square, which caused the militia stationed there to open fire upon it. However, those inside the vehicle were bakers en route to their workplace, and one of them was killed. The origin of the shots was investigated and, after determining who the militiaman was who fired them, his gun was seized and he was expelled from the militias for four days as punishment for what happened.[36]

With the aim of trying to put an end to the protagonism of these centres, the government carried out various measures. On the one hand, they launched a reform process, which aimed to adapt the administration to the new situation, generating laws and decrees to stop the committees. On the other hand, they created the CPIP – Comité Provincial de Investigación Pública Provincial (Provincial Committee of Public Inquiry) on the initiative of Manuel Muñoz, director of the DGS – Dirección General de Seguridad (General Directorate of Security), on 4 August 1936. All the political and union forces defending the Republic participated in the formation of this centre.[37] At first, Manuel Muñoz wanted it to be a centre where inspections and arrests were made, transferring the suspects to the DGS. However, the revolutionary forces present at the constituent meeting asked to be able to judge the detainees. As a concession, Manuel Muñoz accepted this so that the political union forces gathered at the meeting did not withdraw their support. He thought that he could subdue them little by little once they were within the state system. However, that did not happen. The CPIP became a centre of reference within the revolutionary organizations that comprised it, to which they sent their brigade members to serve, carrying out all kinds of judicial and public-order tasks without any control on the part of the government. Therefore, this measure failed insofar as it was created to control the revolutionary committees and their "brigadillas". Faced with the failure of the CPIP, an attempt was again made to incorporate the members of the committees to state agencies.[38] Thus, the MVR – Milicias de Vigilancia de Retaguardia (Rear-Guard Surveillance Militias) were constituted, but in this case, instead of attracting the top leaders of the unions and political parties that fought within the Republican rear

35 *AGHD*, Fondo Madrid, Summary 61130, file 6109.
36 Ibid.
37 Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT), Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI), Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias (FIJL), Partido Sindicalista (PS), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), Partido Comunista Español (PCE), Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas (JSU), Izquierda Republicana (IR), and Unión Republicana (UR).
38 RUIZ, Julius: *El terror rojo. Madrid, 1936*. Espasa, Barcelona 2012, pp. 124–126, 209–212.

guard, as the CPIP did, it was intended for the MVR to attract the bases, incorporating them as militiamen in order to control them. However, this effort was also a failure. Both the militias and the committee were two institutions that were created with the intention of incorporating revolutionary elements into the state to show the population that supported the revolutionary initiatives of the local committees that the government had changed; that it had incorporated revolutionary elements into its doctrinal corpus. We cannot forget, on the other hand, that the demands of war – and the need for a rear guard prepared for a long and total war (a concept introduced as of October-November) – also had an influence on the control of violence and the disappearance of the committees.

Narratives of revolutionary violence

Throughout the forty years of dictatorship, the violence that took place in the Republican rear guard was a recurring object of the literature sympathetic to the Franco regime, which was one way of legitimizing the new regime and its justice.[39] Life stories and novels set in the Republican rear guard had already begun to appear during the civil war, and they started to define the characteristics of violence. These characteristics were kept alive by the regime throughout the four decades of its existence, even if they lacked empirical foundation. There were several objectives, and they were very diverse. During the war, for example, efforts were made to discredit the enemy, making everyone guilty. This was done in conjunction with creating a collective imaginary scenario full of horrors with the intention of fomenting the fight against this enemy and eliminating any possibility of foreign aid to the Second Republic.

Regarding the violence itself, these narratives treated the subject as a *combination of propaganda, martyrologies, and silences; commemoration for some and fear for others, and myths for almost everyone*.[40] Therefore, an "impressionist vision" of violent events was offered, insofar as it did not resort to the systematization and criticism of the sources, but used "propaganda, adjectives and exclamations".[41] The image that these narratives wanted to give about the violence in the Republican rear guard was that of a "systematic or scientific terror" inspired by Bolshevism. The best example, according to the historian Hugo García, was that *there is no story set in Madrid that does not include its cheka, usually described as a gloomy and sinister basement that serves as a torture chamber for dirty and evil militiamen*.[42] This was set amid an atmosphere of chaos, anarchy, and destruction.[43]

39 GARCÍA, Hugo: "Relatos para una guerra. Terror testimonio y literatura en la España nacional". *Ayer*, 2009, Vol. 76, No. 4, p. 145.

40 LEDESMA, José Luis: "Del pasado oculto a un pasado omnipresente: Las violencias en la Guerra Civil y la historiografía reciente". *Jerónimo Zurita. Revista de Historia*, 2009, No. 84, p. 165.

41 LEDESMA, José Luis: "El 1936 más opaco: las violencias en la zona republicana durante la Guerra Civil y sus narrativas". *Historia Social*, 2007, No. 58, p. 152.

42 GARCÍA, Hugo: *"Relatos para una guerra"*, p. 168.

43 LEDESMA VERA, José Luis: "Qué violencia para qué retaguardia, o la República en guerra de 1936". *Ayer*, 2009, Vol. 76, No. 4, p. 96.

Unlike the systematic nature of the Soviet Cheka that had emerged thanks to the Russian Revolution, the so-called "chekas" on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War stemmed from initiatives that came from below. Even though there is no doubt that the use of violence as a revolutionary weapon was intentional and planned, the chekas never had the full support of the Republican state, which even stopped and channelled them as soon as it had the chance. Another characteristic is that the violence and its forms evolved at the same time as the conflict did. It was not systematic and organized violence like that which was carried out by the insurgent forces, and it was limited in time and intensity. The month in which executions and murders peaked was August 1936. In the following months it would decrease. Moreover, 97.6% of all the executions that took place throughout the conflict occurred in Madrid during the first six months of war.[44] A minimum of 5,800 people were murdered and executed between July and October 1936.[45] Starting in October, with the consolidation of the fronts and the needs of a total war (which demanded discipline and order in the rear guard), the violence diminished as did the political and public space occupied by the committees.[46] However, we cannot talk about the organization of violence from above in the Republican rear guard. A mosaic of micropowers broke into the public scene occupying a space left by the state. These micropowers, usually revolutionary committees, were the main promoters of violence in the rear guard, not the Republican government.

There were multiple characteristics that defined the violence (not only physical, but also verbal, material, social, or economic) that occurred in the Republican rear guard, and they were very diverse. They encompass the ones produced by the conflict's own dynamics as endogenous elements, as well as those of the fledgling revolution that took place after the loss of state control in certain areas. The first actions implemented by the repression included those generated by the coup d'état, which were executed as a counter-coup logic. In short, they were an improvised response to prevent the uprising from becoming established, and they were a way of responding to the violence carried out by the coup.[47] The violence that occurred after the coup was typically the violence of war, which was a radical break from the political and social discursive struggles of the previous months. Wars represent the ideal scenario of aggression and violence, and they are the main breeding ground for their various manifestations, which unfold in the shadow of the main conflict and are fed by the community being radically inundated by weapons. They are also nourished by the dynamics of revenge, the collapse of ethical codes, socio-cultural regulations and normative criteria, and the relativization of death. Additionally, these manifestations of violence present a new way of waging war with an unprecedented eagerness to destroy, and a radical and accentuating blurring of the borders between civilians and

44 CERVERA GIL, Javier: *Madrid en guerra*, pp. 74–76.
45 RODRIGO, Javier: *Hasta la raíz*, p. 40.
46 LEDESMA, José Luis: *Los días de llamas de la revolución: violencia y política en la retaguardia republicana de Zaragoza durante la guerra civil*. Institución Fernando el Católico, Zaragoza 2004, p. 133.
47 LEDESMA, José Luis: *"Una retaguardia al rojo"*, p. 158.

combatants.[48] In this context, the figure of the suspect, who immediately became the enemy to be defeated, gained greater relevance. It became an enemy that was defined in consonance with the war and the revolution. In order to define those who were suspects and label them as enemies, pre-war political and collective cultures resorted to the use of this term, which was given a new meaning with the revolution and war.

Conclusions

Throughout this brief essay we have been able to assess the differences between the Russian repressive model and the one that emerged in the Republican rear guard after the coup d'état. The Soviet institution was created and sheltered by the state with the intention of eliminating the enemies of the nascent regime. In the Spanish case, the centres that were generated by the coup d'état did so autonomously and often against state interests. Moreover, these centres saw the state as an enemy in the power struggles to take the streets and thus represent the popular will. Therefore, in the Russian model there was from the beginning a direct coordination between the government and the political police, but not in the Spanish case, where the centres emerged independently from the state and its interests. The Russian government regulated and enforced a series of rules and laws that guided the Cheka's existence. The Spanish committees, for their part, were organized while taking into account their previous experiences, improvising responses to an unexpected situation, the loss of powers by the state (as a result of the coup d'état and its defeat in the territory that remained loyal to the Republic), and facing the decrees that successive governments supported to make them disappear.

Consequently, this conditioned the logic of violence. In the Bolshevik case, the violence was influenced by state interests while, in the Spanish case, the committees followed revolutionary logic and particular interests, which were linked in turn to those of the conflict. They took over judicial functions and exercised them according to how they conceived the justice "of the people". Therefore, they did not consider themselves murderers, but representatives of the popular will. The Soviet chekists did not face such moral dilemmas when they were appointed official agents by the regime and authorized to ensure public order and repressive functions. In short, the Soviet political police system was a state tool while the Spanish committees were autonomous initiatives at the will of the state and with conflicting interests. Therefore, they exercised violence that was not ruled or directed from above, but by initiatives from below. These differences have implications in terms of the violence being exercised, so we can speak of repression in the case of the Soviet Cheka, and revolutionary violence in the case of the Spanish committees.

48 LEDESMA, José Luis: "La santa ira popular del 36: la violencia en guerra civil y revolución, entre cultura y política". In: MUÑOZ SORO, Javier – LEDESMA, José Luis – RODRIGO, Javier (eds.): *Culturas y políticas de la violencia. España siglo XX*. Siete Mares, Madrid 2005, p. 153. The members of the committees and their brigades have been defined in some works using the term "specialists in violence", which was coined by Charles Tilly. LEDESMA, José Luis: *"Una retaguardia al rojo"*, pp. 163–164.

Another factor that ought to be taken into account, and which differentiates both systems, is the ideological one. While the Soviet political police were established by communists, or at least led by them, in the case of the Spanish committees they were centres that belonged to different ideological currents of the left, ranging from anarchists and communists to socialists and republicans. This difference influenced the way in which revolutionary violence was conceived and the forms in which it was applied.[49] In addition, the committees settled in the headquarters of the pre-existing workers' centres, dividing functions between the reception centre (libertarian athenaeums, communist radio stations, or houses of the socialist people) and the committees. The commissariats of the Cheka were precisely that: commissariats, not cultural centres – neither political nor social. They did not help to open schools,[50] they did not distribute food or clothing, or relocate war refugees, as did the Spanish centres that housed the revolutionary committees.[51]

Given the broad differences that separated both repressive models, one could ask why the term "Cheka" was used to define the Spanish committees. As has been seen through an analysis of the press, the term was familiar to Spaniards and identified as a revolutionary experience that was communist in nature and involved massive and even ruthless violence. Because of the emergence of the Spanish committees after the coup d'état, the insurgents saw an opportunity to link what happened in areas such as Madrid or Barcelona to the idea of the Soviet revolution and, therefore, to the Cheka. It was used to generate fear in the democratic powers and to discredit the Republic, cornering it, internationally speaking. It also fulfilled a role at the national level, however, by simplifying the enemy and dehumanizing it, linking it to external experiences and foreign interference in confrontation with the "idea of Spain" promoted by the coup plotters. Furthermore, the use of the term cheka hid the great heterogeneity of the Spanish committees, which were not only different in terms of the ideology of its members (anarchism, socialism, and communism), but also in terms of their previous personal experience. In this way, for example, we find anarchist committees very different from each other. But it not only served to hide the great typological heterogeneity of centres; it also blurred the barriers between committees' members (responsible for exercising revolutionary violence) and the centres' personnel who housed them. Therefore, and returning to the anarchist example, the athenaeums that housed the defence committees responsible for the repressive work, were defined as cheka and all their members, regardless of whether they belonged to the committee or the athenaeum, were branded chekists. All this was elaborated in the pro-Franco propaganda to generate the idea of the enemy.[52]

49 *AGHD*, Fondo Madrid, Summary 15430, file 2817; Ibid., Summary 45413, Box 999, No. 7.
50 *CDMH*, PS-Madrid, Box 452, Document 144.
51 *AGHD*, Fondo Madrid, Summary 49380, Box 2001, No. 5.
52 For their help and support in reviewing this work, I would like to thank to José María Faraldo and Juan Gutierrez, especially the latter for his help with the translation.