



While he was head of Cheka, Felix Dzerzhinsky - depicted here, in 1918 - used Fanny Kaplan's attempted assassination of Vladimir Lenin to justify the use of terror against perceived enemies of the Revolution.

Fanny Kaplan, a Socialist Revolutionary, shot Lenin on the 30th of August, 1918. Although she did not kill him, Kaplan wounded the Bolshevik leader.

Immediately taken into custody, Kaplan was questioned, then executed - by a bullet to the back of her head - a few days later (on September 3, 1918).



During her interrogation, Kaplan stated why she had tried to assassinate Lenin:

My name is Fanya Kaplan. Today I shot Lenin. I did it on my own. I will not say from whom I obtained my revolver. I will give no details. I had resolved to kill Lenin long ago. I consider him a traitor to the Revolution. I was exiled to Akatui for participating in an assassination attempt against a Tsarist official in Kiev. I spent 11 years at hard labor. After the Revolution, I was freed. I favoured the Constituent Assembly and am still for it. (*The Bolsheviks, Volume II: How the Soviets Seize Power*, by John D. Loscher, at [page 549](#).)

Bolshevik leaders worried that others might be planning more assassinations. Felix Dzerzhinsky wanted his secret-police organization - called Cheka - to have the power to take action against such people.

Reportedly telling Lenin that "the proletariat must be made to fear us," Dzerzhinsky justified the use of terror (as he had in an interview with *Novaia Zhizn* on the 14th of July, 1918):

We stand for organized terror - this should be frankly admitted. Terror is an absolute necessity during times of revolution. Our aim is to fight against the enemies of the Soviet Government and of the new order of life.

We judge quickly. In most cases only a day passes between the apprehension of the criminal and his sentence. When confronted with evidence criminals in almost every case confess; and what argument can have greater weight than a criminal's own confession. (Quoted by Loscher, at [pages 549-550](#).)

Dzerzhinsky had an article published in *Krasnaya Gazeta* ("The Red Gazette") which warned people about the terror to come:

We will turn our hearts into steel, which we will temper in the fire of suffering and the blood of fighters for freedom. We will make our hearts cruel, hard, and immovable, so that no mercy will enter them, and so that they will not quiver at the sight of a sea of enemy blood. We will let loose the floodgates of that sea.

Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands; let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritsky, Zinoviev and Volodarski, let there be floods of the blood of the bourgeois - more blood, as much as possible. (Article in *Krasnaya Gazeta*, 1 September 1918, entitled "The Start of the Red Terror." Quoted in Loscher, at [page 550](#).)

Without due process, perceived enemies of the Revolution were dealt-with, just as Dzerzhinsky outlined. Fanny Kaplan's actions against Lenin had become a justification for actions against the Russian people.

A few years later, Dzerzhinsky had not changed his mind about the use of terror:

...Wherever the scoundrel plants himself - in an office behind a green-baize desk or in a watchman's hut - he will be discovered and brought before the court of the R[evolution] Tribunal, whose punitive hammer will fall with all the devastating might and anger of which it is capable, for there is no mercy for the deadly enemies of our revival. No circumstances will be taken into account when sentence is passed on people who take bribes. The sternest punishment awaits them.

At the same time, the Soviet Government calls on all honest citizens, in whom painful consciousness of the indelible shame and corrupting influence of bribes is alive, to give their all in the seeking out and discovering bribe-taking scoundrels.

Be keen-eyed and vigilant! Proletarian hands should not and cannot be sullied by bribes! (From the December 6, 1921 article "Citizens! Railwaymen!")

In other words ... people were encouraged to spy on others and, if they suspected anything, to provide the information to the government (Cheka) officials.

Within five years after his "Citizens!" article, Dzerzhinsky died of heart failure after making a lengthy speech. His death did not end the use of terror against suspected enemies of the Soviet government.

Credits:

Image of Felix Dzerzhinsky, as he appeared on 28 September 1918. Image online, courtesy RIA Novosti Archive, image #6464 / RIA Novosti.

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