

# **Military History Group Meeting 13 January 2026**

## **Terror Tactics in War**

By terror tactics, we mean deliberate actions taken against civilians, probably to break civilian morale, but especially to influence the enemy authorities to alter the way they prosecute the war or perhaps hoping it would promote a cessation of the conflict. They may even be employed as pure revenge, perhaps in retaliation for some perceived wrong they have been subject to.

We explored several wars in the first half of the Twentieth Century, but excluded the World Wars, to try and gauge the extent of terror tactics and whether they could be judged to be a successful policy.

Our slides (attached/below) show the wars, who were the main protagonists, whether they employed terror tactics and why, the actions directed at the civilian population, the aims of the terror tactics and whether they could be said to be successful.

In summary, of the 14 wars selected, almost all included the use of terror tactics to a greater or lesser degree. In some wars, terror employed by one side came about as a reprisal for terror actions employed by the other. In some cases, a failure to defeat the enemy's armed forces by conventional warfare led to attacks on civilians as a way of depriving the enemy's fighters from supplies or sustenance. In other wars, often civil wars, terror was deliberately employed from the start of the conflict as a way of removing possible opponents or just to create sufficient fear to eliminate any resistance. Sometimes the use of terror was driven by ethnic or ideological reasons; sometimes terror was employed to encourage people to leave an invaded territory. In the few cases where terror tactics were not encountered, this was because there was: no civilian population in the area; insufficient time for terror actions to be effective; no real benefit to be gained; or because the protagonist had no such aim. However, even where terror was not a deliberate intention, civilians were often affected by 'normal' warfare, regularly resulting in a great number of civilian deaths.

We concluded that the use of terror tactics is an all-too-common feature of war. We noted its worse cases were in civil wars and that the use of terror against the population in such wars often continued after the war and might even continue to be the ongoing normal practice of some regimes. Whether the use of terror tactics against the civilian population was a successful approach to fighting a war was less clear. In many cases, it did help to a greater or lesser extent to 'win the war', but in others it could be seen to be successful in the short term, not so much in the longer term. Tragically, the number of civilian deaths from terror tactics was often in the many thousands, even millions.