

# Highland Rebels: The North Caucasus During the Stalinist Collectivization Campaign

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## Abstract

This article investigates one of the most tragic episodes of Soviet history: the collectivization campaign of 1929–30, when the Soviet state's brutal assault on the peasantry plunged the whole country into chaos and provoked large scale rebellions. Resistance was especially fierce in the Muslim dominated parts of the North Caucasus, a notoriously troubled region where Soviet structures were still very weak, and the social cohesion of mountain communities strong. Ultimately, the Red Army and the armed forces of the secret police crushed these rebellions ruthlessly. Yet in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Karachai and parts of Dagestan, they were at least sufficiently violent for the Soviet leadership to decide to suspend their collectivization attempt altogether until the mid-1930s. This is the first study to analyse collectivization in the non-Russian areas of the North Caucasus based on material from Russian archives as well as published document collections containing Soviet secret police reports.

## Keywords

Chechnya, collectivization, North Caucasus, Soviet Union, Stalinism, violence

In mid-November of 1929, the Bolshevik leadership approved the program of 'total collectivization' (*sploshchnaia kollektivizatsia*). This marked the beginning of the state's frontal assault on the agrarian economic system and way of life across the entire country. The village in its traditional form was to be abolished. The village assemblies with their councils of elders were banned. Peasants were to become proletarians, to be drafted en masse for work in the kolkhoz, the collective farm. At the

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regions, especially in Chukotka, Igarka and Chersky, many had founded in early years of their migration during the displacement campaigns of the mid 1930s. They had either built the new or had processed migrants just after displacement from other regions where their campaigns had not been completed.<sup>57</sup>

The migrants and rapid construction work continued and also be continued in a specific form of region, which in the new Russian periphery was dominated more strongly than elsewhere by the Soviet police whose members were located in one town. Especially in the remote administrative areas of the North Caucasus, it was the Russian-dominated Soviet police and its agents who, in most of other functioning Soviet institutions, in other regions actually served as the only representative of state power in the countryside.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, both efficiency and by the Soviet police and construction by the locals had caused sufficient harm to build up a major or extremely violent conflict in the case of the collectivization campaign. Thus, by the time the party leadership demanded nationwide collectivization, all of the ingredients for the subsequent outbreak of violence had already been added to the mix.

The North Caucasus, with its border with the Russian and Turkic states and its formidable climate, was one of the nation's frontiers. As early as 4 July 1936, Andrei A. Andreev, head of the North Caucasian Regional Party Committee and member of the Politburo, presented to the Politburo a comprehensive report on 'material reconstruction' of the North Caucasus.<sup>59</sup> At this point in time, however, the goals were as yet only vaguely planned. The specific form of the collective farms had not yet been agreed upon, either. It is noticeable, however, that the Moscow circle, which was only three weeks past at that time, was not mentioned even as passing matter in the Andreev report or in the subsequent discussion among the Politburo members, even though developments in other non-Russian settlement areas of the North Caucasus also indicated that the building campaign had been stopped for good.

For the party leadership was neither willing nor ready at this time to consider potential problems. The Bolsheviks regarded the traditional peasant as an adversary which had to be eliminated sooner or later in order to build socialism. Against

the chaos of the Civil War which followed the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, Lenin had occasionally advised a cautious approach. Yet by the end of the 1920s, the Soviet party leadership under Iosif V. Stalin ran out of patience. If the Soviet Union was to finally take the leap from an agricultural country to a modern

57. Thus, the Chukotka is particularly well processed their migrants in the North Caucasus from among the largest administrative borders with Georgia and Abkhazia. T. V. Shchegoleva, *Stavropol'skiy Krai* (Stavropol'skiy Krai: izdatel'stvo 'Kavkazskiy Krai', 1997), 107–108.

58. On the Soviet system in North Caucasus, see discussion of the Red Army's North Caucasus office report (1936) by A. M. Chudakov, *Stavropol'skiy Krai* (Stavropol'skiy Krai: izdatel'stvo 'Kavkazskiy Krai', 1997), 107–108.

59. Andreev's report, including the subsequent discussion, is published in: I. V. Andreev, *I. V. Andreev i ego kolektivizatsiya* (Moscow: Sovetskoye Radio, 1987), 148–149. T. V. Shchegoleva, *Stavropol'skiy Krai* (Stavropol'skiy Krai: izdatel'stvo 'Kavkazskiy Krai', 1997), 107–108.

industrialized economy, it was time the Bolshevik state took up the war with the peasantry.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the 1920s, there had never been a complete break of either the secret police reports labeled 'bandits' (banditism in the North Caucasus). With the passage of time, however, it made a strange reappearance in the beginning of 1928.<sup>48</sup> In these reports, the secret police frequently portrayed band crimes as being part of a larger threat, for instance by suggesting that there was a connection between the counterrevolutionary movements of White generals in Chechnya, aimed at the Communist annex of the Trans and Donbas plains, and the activities of anti-Soviet groups in Ingushetia, Chechnya and Daghestan.<sup>49</sup> In Chechnya in particular, a network is said to have coordinated its activities of subversion in the effort that Turkey and its allies were planning to conquer the Caucasus and restore Islam. The secret police described Islamic clerics, but also wandering preachers, as the source of such networks.<sup>50</sup>

All of these events, according to a secret police report of December 1928, showed the necessity of carrying out disarmament operations and liquidating counterrevolutionary bandit elements in Chechnya and Ingushetia.<sup>51</sup> By 1 November 1928, that is before the actual start of mass collectivization, the security forces had conducted a total of 11,475 operations as a large-scale operation in Chechnya and Ingushetia where thousands of them conducted in Chechnya. Liquidated armed bands of robbers, and arrested a number of other leaders as well as dozens of 'bandits', 'robbers' and other counterrevolutionary elements.<sup>52</sup> In the same time, the secret police was also beginning the liquidation of counterrevolutionary organizations in the Daghestan districts of Budakovo, Akovskoe and Khizan-Turkovich, which in previous years had also served as refuges for white Cossacks. There were also past campaigns of collectivization, when members of the secret police had reportedly been targeted by assassins in these areas.<sup>53</sup>

While the disarmament campaigns were predominantly directed at revolutionary aims, it was mainly the peasants in the foothills who felt the pressure in

47. *Trudy, Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (note 36), 26.

48. According to a secret police report of December 1928, the situation in the North Caucasus had settled down after the disarmament campaign of 1925. However, from 1926 onwards, the bandit activity increased once more. In the period of January to August 1928 alone, the NKVD reported 17 attacks in Chechnya and in a Ingushetia District. *Arkhivnyi dokument*, Vol. 1, 286-7.

49. *Ibid.*, 286-88.

50. *Ibid.*, 271. References about the continued role of the Soviet Union, the coming of war, or rather the lack of collectivization the end of war, were especially prominent in the counter-revolutionary during times of fear and uncertainty. Secret representatives often use foreign agents, 'bandits', priests and other counter-revolutionaries. For the targeted figure such as wandering religious figures, figures in contact with foreign countries, it is not clear whether whether they were called the secret liquidation of networks, or if the secret police might include them as 'bandits'. *Trudy, Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (note 36), 27.

51. *Trudy, Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (note 36), 286-88.

52. In Chechnya, the disarmament campaign concentrated mainly on three revolutionary districts: from Budakovo, Budak-Turkovich and Khizan-Turkovich, with which the military cooperation was already broken from earlier operations, mainly against the former leader of the 1920s rebellion, *Trudy, Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (note 36), 286-7.

53. *Ibid.*