

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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the people. The countryside was to be cleared of God. The more devout they became, the more they were persecuted and condemned as peasant reactionaries, and their members of the party. In the course of the cultural revolution, members of peasant communities, members of church and church bells were condemned as the enemies of the revolution. The Bolsheviks had no other idea of how the revolution would run. The revolution had to be guided by the principles of the revolution itself of the revolution. The Bolsheviks believed that God and the principles of the revolution were the same.

The establishment of collective farms was intended to allow more efficient control of agricultural production. This campaign, which the Bolsheviks propagated as part of their great socialist reconstruction plan, not only targeted the peasants, but was also directed against religious institutions as well as their agents and symbols. The spiritual representatives of all religious denominations had already been subjected to persecution and repression. However, once the urban brigades closed down scores of churches and mosques on their march through the countryside, harassing the clergy, burning icons and melting down church bells, collectivization took on the character of an openly anti-religious campaign that had many people believing that the Apocalypse, the end of the world, had arrived.²