

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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same time, the countryside was to be cleared of 'kulaks'. The state deprived these peasants of capitalistic farmers and exploiters of poorer peasants, and thus enemies of the people. In the course of the so-called 'dekulakization campaign', hundreds of thousands of alleged 'kulaks' were arrested, deported, and many of them died.¹

As soon as the collectivization campaign began, the countryside descended into chaos. The Bolsheviks had no clear idea of how the peasants were to be implemented, and did not bother to consider the potentially devastating effect of the campaign. The Bolsheviks considered the land and its population to be resources available for exploitation. They despised the rural way of life and culture, which in their eyes were the epitome of backwardness.

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

The forced collectivization provoked various forms of resistance, ranging from letters of protest from peasants to the party and state leaderships and voluntary mass flight out of cities and relinquishing of land and assets to the migration of millions of newly unemployed men to urban centers. Many peasants retreated to the nearest forests and finally engaged themselves in joining a kulak. A substantial minority, mostly including those peasants who had been cleared as 'kulaks', saw no other option than to flee into the forests, mountains or swamps, where they eventually joined up as armed bands.

Collectivization was met with rejection and armed resistance by people in all parts of the country.³ Yet it was in the ethnically mixed, non-Russian and predominantly Muslim populated borderland areas that resistance was frequently meted out on large scale uprisings and military confrontations often involving regular Red Army troops. Apart from Central Asia, this type of conflict was especially characteristic of the non-Russian parts of the North Caucasus, where resistance took on an exceptionally fierce form. To be sure, the hilly topography did not determine the resistance of the various peoples living there. However, the mountains offered

1. For a general overview on collectivization in the Soviet Union, cf. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Soviet Collectivization and the Creation of Peasant Resisters* (New York, 1991 and Oxford 1996).

2. On resistance to collectivization, cf. Fitzpatrick, *Soviet Peasants: Resisters and Rebels in the Soviet Village after Collectivization* (New York, 1991 1996), 40-1.

3. According to data provided by the Soviet state police, the largest number of mass demonstrations during the height of the collectivization campaign in 1929 was reported in the grain-producing and Muslim regions, namely Ukraine, the North Caucasus (the Kuban and Terek steppes), the Central Black Earth and the Lower Volga. For an overview on the scale of rebellion in the USSR, cf. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Soviet Peasants*, 146.