

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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At the November plenary in 1929, Viacheslav M. Molotov stated his personal conviction that by the summer of 1930, 'collectivization in the North Caucasus should be by and large complete'.⁵ Molotov, who was responsible within the Central Committee for the collectivization project, could not or would not foresee that the endeavour would end in a fiasco. All that mattered to him was the very tight schedule: The Bolsheviks had only about four months before it was time for sowing, by which time the collective farms had to be functional and productive.⁶