

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 farms and exploitation of poorer peasants, and then ordered 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.

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 taught, trained, 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 epitomes 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. Moreover, since the urban brigades closed down scores of churches and monasteries as they marched through the countryside, burning the icons, 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.³

This forced march provoked various forms of reactions, ranging from letters of protest from peasants to the party and state leaderships and ultimately mass struggle on a local and independent of local and state to the organization of millions of mostly younger men to urban centers. Many peasants collected in the massive protests and finally engaged themselves in joining a rebellion. A substantial number of, 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

For it was in the ethnically mixed, non-Russian and predominantly Russian populated borderland areas that resistance were frequently meted out 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 fully topographic did not determine the resistance of the various peoples living there. Moreover, the peasants offered

3. For a general overview on collectivization in the Soviet Union, cf. Boris Hruslov, *From Peasants to Workers: The Soviet Union and the Problem of Peasant Resistance* (New York, NY and Oxford, 1986).
4. On resistance to collectivization, cf. Christopher Clark, *Peasants, Revolution and Survival in the Soviet Union: the collectivization crisis, 1928-1930* (New York, NY, 1986), p. 1.

3 According to data provided by the Soviet secret police, the largest number of mass disturbances during the height of the collectivization campaign in 1930 was reported in the grain producing and black soil regions, namely Ukraine, the North Caucasus (the Kuban and Terek plains), the Central Black Earth and the Lower Volga. *Report on resistance in the work of resistance in the USSR* (Moscow, 1930), p. 100.