

The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule

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...the Soviet government's attempts to impose its will on the Kabardians, and the resulting resistance to the new regime. The first of these was the 'Baksan' uprising in Kabardino-Balkaria in 1928; ...

The Baksan uprising

The immediate sequence of events in Kabardino-Balkaria, which subsequently came to be known as the 'Baksan uprising', received fairly detailed coverage in post-action Soviet investigations, and remains reasonably clear (though with significant ongoing lacunae) today, particularly since they unfolded across a time span of just three days. They also occurred, however, against a broader general backdrop of growing social tension, generated by an intensified Soviet political campaign to confiscate land and agricultural equipment from large landholders, close down mosques and *madrasas*, and extract bread from the countryside by tougher administrative measures – during the harvest campaign of 1928 alone, some 232 settlements in Kabardino-Balkaria were subjected to such requisitioning expeditions.³⁰

Alongside these other background factors, the internal redivision of land rights undertaken since 1922, designed to encourage collective farms, as well as create fairer conditions for widows and the poorest peasants, also generated territorial anomalies and a degree of resistance from larger landholders. In particular, despite attempts to create natural and contiguous new pastureland boundaries, new landowners sometimes found themselves separated from their assigned fields by as much as 60–100 km, which forced a degree of internal migration to occur. For a rural peasantry still deeply attached to the local soil where houses had been built by their own hands, and their ancestors were buried, such innovations bred suspicion and resentment. In April 1925 ninety households refused to migrate from the

village of Psygans, and twelve households which had already been sent forward to a new location refused to settle, and returned instead to their original homes.³¹ Agitation for collectivization in general meanwhile was often carried out by illiterate party workers, and social tension was increased yet further by pressure on rural communities to conduct unpaid ameliorative work in local infrastructure projects – the construction of the Baksan–Malka irrigation canal was undertaken by exactly these means in May–June 1928, with peasants dragged from their fields at the height of the harvest season. It was to be resentment generated by this obligation in particular which led many to participate in the disturbances later labelled the Baksan uprising.³²

On 10 June 1928, Kabardino-Balkaria's OGPU forces were drummed into action at eight in the morning to help stabilize Baksan, in response to reports that a large crowd had already stormed the police station there, liberating all the prisoners within, and seizing 3 machine guns, 227 rifles, and around 2,500 rounds of ammunition in the process. The root cause of the trouble had begun the previous day, when two peasants from the nearby village of Kyzburn-2 were arrested by local militiamen for refusing to participate in unpaid ameliorative work. En route to the jail at Baksan, both the militiamen and their prisoners had then subsequently passed by a large crowd of peasants engaged in this same work who, on enquiring why their two fellow villagers had been arrested, were reputedly told to 'fuck off' by the militia. An incensed crowd of around 300 had then descended on Baksan and liberated the two men, only for the head of the district that same evening to arrive and rearrest not only the two original offenders, but also all those now accused of being most involved in forcing their earlier release as well. This in turn led on the 10th to a crowd of between 2,000 and 3,000 people, including 500 horsemen, storming the Baksan jail, liberating those inside, and torturing the deputy chairman of the district *ispolkom* (slashing him with bladed weapons) in the process.³³

Whilst OGPU forces began to arrive in the immediate wake of these events on the morning of the 10th, the regional party chairman, Betal Kalmykov, accompanied by Mikhel'son, head of the Kabardino-Balkar OGPU, was already engaged in talks at the local bazaar with a crowd of around 2,000 people, encouraging the rioters both to surrender the stolen weapons, and turn over any escaped prisoners in their midst. The crowd proved restive, however, with shouts recorded of 'Kalmykov's lying', 'down with the Communists' and even 'kill Kalmykov, whilst he lives we won't have sharia'. Kalmykov was forced to retreat, and in his absence the meeting at the bazaar then continued, with a further five speakers reportedly only stirring up the crowd yet further, according to later OGPU reports. The crowd dispersed at around four in the afternoon of the 10th, having elected to hand over seven men and a small number of arms, but with most of the weaponry, according to the OGPU, remaining concealed and smuggled away 'under women's dresses'. That same day the man whom OGPU investigations would later blame for the majority of what followed, the local cleric Askhad Shogentsukov, reportedly met with a small group of fellow conspirators, and organized the dispatch of agitators to surrounding villages to attempt to dramatically escalate the level of unrest.

On the 11th Kalmykov and Mikhel'son visited Kyzburn-2 to again attempt talks with the local population and encourage the surrender of guilty parties, but once more departed after achieving only extremely limited results, though the chairman of the local *selsoviet* was replaced. On the 12th a large meeting occurred in Kyzburn-2 with representatives from neighbouring villages now present, where fresh demands – for the establishment of 'sharia rule' and 'Soviet power without Communists' – were formulated. Askhad Shogentsukov and his allies promoted the creation of an organizational staff incorporating one member from each of the twelve villages represented at the meeting. At this point, however, in an event destined to cause further controversy in both Soviet and post-Soviet accounts of the uprising, an unidentified horseman reportedly arrived, declaring that Piatigorsk and Kislovodsk had already fallen to insurgent forces, and that the assembled crowd should now advance immediately on Baksan to seize arms before marching on Nal'chik.³⁴ Around 5,000 people, again including approximately 500 horsemen, then re-descended on Baksan singing hymns, and demanding the handover of weapons and the right to occupy the local *ispolkom* administrative building. Talks proceeded fruitlessly between the crowd and the local Soviet authorities from 1.30 to 4.30 p.m., after which the mob broke the deadlock by suddenly attempting to storm the barricaded doors of the *ispolkom* building, hurling rocks and attempting to seize the Soviet militia's machine gun in the process. Three volleys into the air initially dispersed this assault, but the mob then returned and Meshcheriakov, the militia commander in charge, now responding to six hostile shots fired, ordered independent return fire and the hurling of hand grenades to disperse the attackers. This had the desired effect, leaving seven dead and twelve wounded (two badly) on the ground in front of the *ispolkom* building. By nightfall on the 12th Mikhel'son had arrived with an additional machine gun and a mortar, and by the 14th Baksan had again been rendered fully secure by the arrival of Red Army reinforcements.³⁵