

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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There had already been a major revolt in connection with the acceleration of the state grain campaign

(*khlebozagotovka*) in mid-June 1928 in the Baksan district (*okrug*) of the Kabardino-Balkaria region.

By the time the revolt began in the Baksan district, the situation in many villages of Kabardino-Balkaria had already been tense for some time.

The revolt was triggered by an incident in the Kizburun II settlement, which was only a few kilometres away from the district capital, Baksan.¹⁶ According to a detailed report submitted to the Bolshevik leadership by the OGPU intelligence department a few weeks after the Baksan revolt had been suppressed, the initial spark was ignited on 8 June 1928, when the farmers were confronted with demands for 4000 *pud* of grain (1 *pud* = 16.38 kg) to be provided during the month of June.

The actual revolt began on 10 June 1928. In the early morning hours, hundreds of villagers assembled in Kizburun II with the aim of freeing the prisoners from jail. Before making their way to Baksan, they plucked up their courage by dancing and were cheered on by the assembled women.¹⁹ According to the secret police report, the approximately 1500-strong mob, armed with 'pitchforks, poles, and hoes', was led by Urusov.²⁰ Upon their arrival in Baksan, the crowd marched to the district government building to demand the prisoners' release. After negotiations with the authorities failed, the militia opened fire on the crowd with a machine gun. However, the crowd managed to subdue and disarm the police officers. They beat up the head of the district administration as well as the police officers, severely injuring a policeman as well as the local state official. Then the crowd stormed the prison, released the inmates, and entered the arms depot. There, they seized two more machine guns, 13 rifles, and 2500 rounds of ammunition.²¹ Then the assembly dispersed, with many returning home. The remainder of the rioters, according to the account, heaped abuse on the representatives of the district government who had arrived from Nal'chik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria. These representatives included the chairman of the regional government, Betal E. Kalmykov, and Artur I. Mikhel'son, the head of the Kabardino-Balkaria section of the OGPU.²² Possibly in order to avoid open confrontation and further bloodshed, the protesters did not offer any active resistance, returned some of the weapons they had seized and reluctantly surrendered to the authorities some of the people they had liberated from jail earlier. However, the people refused to betray the leaders of the revolt, who had withdrawn before the arrival of the government representatives.²³

The following day, on 11 June, Kalmykov and the local secret police representative arrived in Kizburun II in order to persuade the crowd to surrender the leaders of the movement. Kalmykov also called upon the people not to allow residents of other villages to become involved in the affairs of Kizburun II. The residents then elected a new village Soviet and expressed their remorse to Kalmykov.²⁴ But the efforts of Kalmykov would prove largely ineffectual: The rebels of Kizburun II had already sent messengers to the surrounding villages to

ask their residents for support. On the evening of 11 June there seems to have been a large assembly in Kizburun II, attended by about 3000 people, about one-third of them from the neighbouring villages.²⁵ The revolt was now led by a 'rebel staff', which according to the secret police report was made up exclusively of 'kulaks' and adherents of the sharia, the Islamic law.²⁶

A fateful move for the future course of events was the decision by the Kizburun II rebels to march on Baksan once more on 12 June. It is unclear from the OGPU intelligence department's report why this decision was taken. According to one account found in post-Soviet literature, a messenger on horseback from Baksan brought news to the people in Kizburun II that the towns of Piatigorsk and Kislovodsk had already fallen into the hands of rebel forces. The messenger called on the villagers to take action immediately: They were to march to Baksan together with likeminded residents of neighbouring villages, seize weapons, and then capture the regional capital Nal'chik together with the rebels from other parts of the region.²⁹

In any case, on 12 June, about 3000 people marched on Baksan, some of them reportedly carrying firearms.³⁰ Upon their arrival, the crowd surrounded the building housing 45 OGPU members and soldiers of the National Cavalry Division (a military unit consisting of local troops). The crowd demanded that these troops hand over their weapons. When even warning shots failed to disperse the mob, the security forces opened fire. By their own accounts, they killed eight people and wounded 20.³¹ It was only now that the crowd dispersed. In the night of 12/13 June, fresh security police forces commanded by Mikhel'son arrived, reinforced the following day by Red Army units, which secured the entire town and

its surroundings.³² This essentially marked the end of the revolt.

Baksan revolt was at the time not only one of the most violent and largest peasant upheavals, it also anticipated those patterns of peasant resistance which would become typical for the later, far larger rebellions after the start of the collectivization campaign in the North Caucasus.

One of the decisive factors for the population's determination to join together in a mass uprising seems to have been the high degree of solidarity among the villagers. Social relations were by no means always harmonious in the North Caucasus villages.