

# **The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule**

**Alex Marshall**



**Routledge**

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK



### Armed rebellion in Chechnia

Nearly a year after the Baksan events, towards the end of 1929, Chechnia was rocked by armed disturbances which in turn compelled the first major Soviet military deployments across that territory since 1925. These disturbances began in exchanges of crossfire with local bandit groups, as well as in public demonstrations on 26 July in the village of Bachi-Iurt against the centrally imposed bread procurement plan. On 19 October the building housing the *selsoviet* in the village of Goiti was destroyed by a large explosion, from which local party workers only escaped by chance, having been dispersed by the council chairman just minutes beforehand. On 11 November two peasants classified as *kulaks* were uncovered in the village of Zakan-Iurt with a weapons arsenal with which they were allegedly planning to assassinate the secretary of the local Communist Party cell. Matters finally came to a head, however, in the village of Shali on 7 December, when two Soviet militiamen, accompanied by local *komsomoltsy*, arrived at the house of a local *kulak* named Khasuev and attempted the expropriation of his property. A crowd of some seventy people, armed with rifles and revolvers and led by Shita Istamulov, the former war minister in Uzun Khadzhi's emirate of 1919–20, gathered in the street outside, forcing the Soviet militiamen to retreat into a nearby house where they were then quickly overwhelmed and disarmed, before being thrown out of the village.<sup>39</sup> Rumours of a major insurrection in the making caused the Soviet authorities to quickly rally 230 sabres, 150 bayonets and two armoured cars, whilst the village itself was visited by the first secretary of the Chechen party, the local Soviet military commander, and the local OGPU representative,

Kraft, with an ultimatum to fulfil the harvest plan and surrender those behind the recent disturbances.

On the evening of 9 December 1929, 6 rifles and 40 pounds of bread were handed over, but Shita Istamulov remained defiant, whilst news also began to be received that armed supporters of his cause were also filtering into Shali from Goiti, Artura and Serzhen-Iurt. At dawn on the 11th, Soviet forces amounting to 302 bayonets, 147 sabres, and a battery of mountain guns surrounded Shali and presented an ultimatum that Istamulov and his followers surrender by 11 a.m. At 10.55 a.m. Istamulov issued a 'rude refusal', at which point his house was surrounded and heavy shooting broke out on both sides, the rebels allegedly employing a machine gun which caused the Soviet troops to respond by pounding the house with artillery. After a few shells had been fired, fighting ceased, with six dead subsequently discovered inside the house, amongst them a well-known local bandit, whilst Istamulov himself was reportedly wounded and in hiding. A ring was then established around the village through which only women and children were allowed to pass unchallenged, and filtration of the local population proceeded in order to detain those judged politically suspect. By nightfall on the 15th between 150 and 200 arrests had been made, whilst casualties on the Soviet side from the whole operation were reported at three dead, five badly wounded, two lightly wounded, and two suffering from concussion.

Kraft, the local OGPU commander, was meanwhile conducting a similar operation around Goiti, which on the 11th had been surrounded by a force of 75 sabres and 150 bayonets, and presented with an ultimatum to surrender arms and rebel ringleaders. Here the fighting became somewhat more severe. The Red Army infantrymen involved were facing battle for the first time in a populated area, and had the accompanying unpleasant experience of coming under fire from four sides, whilst the artillery had also been accidentally left behind in Groznyi. This resulted in the first storm of the village failing, and reinforcements amounting to a battalion of infantry with four machine guns and an artillery piece were called up from Groznyi. The armoured cars were also unable to manoeuvre effectively along the muddy village streets, whilst their machine guns jammed after firing only a few rounds, rendering them unable to assist when the infantry came under fire from the direction of the local mosque. Fighting nonetheless drew to a close by the 15th, with 37 artillery rounds having been fired, leading to the destruction of 9 houses and extensive shrapnel damage to 10 others.<sup>40</sup>

As serious as the operations around Shali and Goiti were, however, they soon came to be overshadowed by operations that unfolded around the village of Benoi, a mountain settlement of around 2,887 people, where the Chechen OGPU reported that the arrival of an armed gang of around 100 malcontents on the night of 17 December had led to the local cooperative store being robbed of goods to the value of 10,000 roubles, whilst local Communist Party workers were also put to flight. On 20 December operations against Benoi began, with the whole of the Vladikavkaz infantry school, alongside one mountain- and one field-gun battery, as well as over 620 bayonets and 138 sabres, being dispatched to advance from the direction of Khasaviurt on one side and Vedeno on the other. As before, once

the *aul* was surrounded, on the 22nd an ultimatum was issued to hand over both firearms and the guilty parties within the village within two hours. As extension was then asked for and granted, but upon the deadline expiring, machine-gun fire was directed upon the *aul*. Soviet troops entered shortly thereafter with minimal resistance, the bandits having apparently dispersed in the interim. Political meetings were then held inside the *aul* over the course of the following few days, engaging around 500 local residents, including 100 women, and by the 25th the Soviet forces had also received an offer from 150 locals to help track down and fight the bandits.<sup>41</sup>

None of the fighting around Shali, Goiti or Benoi in the winter of 1929–30 appears to have involved the levels of bloodthirsty local resistance, mass casualties, or victories won at 'terrible cost' later reported by Avtorkhanov to gullible Western commentators, and eagerly repeated by them practically verbatim in accounts thereafter as recently as 2006.<sup>42</sup> Soviet post-combat reports at the time, which had no vested interest in underplaying the stubbornness of the fighting, given how this might adversely affect later requests for reinforcements, nonetheless still reported enemy casualties in dead and injured from the December 1929 fighting at around 60 persons, whilst their own overall casualties amounted cumulatively to just 43 men, of whom 21 were killed or subsequently died of wounds. Even by 10 April 1930, in the wake of a second major operation in Chechnia centred on Benoi, Soviet additional casualties amounted to around 36 persons, of whom 14 were killed – scarcely the catastrophic 'loss of a whole division' subsequently reported by Avtorkhanov.<sup>43</sup> By any measure, therefore, the scale and nature of this unrest hardly represented a return to the era of *Imam Shamil*. Truly large-scale fighting only threatened to occur in March 1932, when stability in the Benoi, Datakh and Nozhai-Iurt regions was reported to be again endangered by the activity of 1,500–2,000 fighters, leading the Soviet authorities to respond by mobilizing 800 OGPU troops, an army regiment with artillery, five aircraft, and an armoured train to meet the threat. However, Kashirin, the commander of the SKVO who conducted these military operations at the time, considered that the OGPU had greatly massaged the total enemy figures, judging the true size of the 1932 insurgency to be '300–400 persons (maximum)'. The centrepiece of this later rebellion was the attempted storm of a local Soviet garrison, and casualties on the insurgent side – their attacks being apparently noted for their religious fanaticism and stubbornness – were later calculated to be relatively heavy, at 333 dead and 150 wounded, in exchange for 27 Soviet dead and 30 wounded.<sup>44</sup>