

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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The actual uprising in relation to the state's collectivization assault thus began in the Chechen lowlands on 7 December 1929, when members of two clans (so called *teips*⁵⁴) in the *aul* Goity cordoned off their living quarters with guards of their own and thus de facto seized power. A similar development took place the following day in the settlement of Shali, where residents disarmed the local militia in response to an attempt by the authorities to dispossess 'kulaks'. The secret police identified Shita Istamulov as the ringleader of the events in Shali. An OGPU report described him as a significant 'ideologue in the Chechen struggle against Soviet power' and a key 'spiritual leader'. Istamulov was accused not only of having headed the resistance in Shali, but also of having tried to incite the surrounding settlements 'in order to organize a major armed uprising'.⁵⁵

On 8 December 1929, the local secret police demanded support from the Red Army, which was reiterated two days later by an official request by the authorized OGPU representative in the North Caucasus. The command of the armed forces in the North Caucasus military region subsequently put together a combat force in Groznyi consisting of two companies from the Vladikavkaz infantry school, one company of the 82nd Infantry Regiment, one squadron of the 28th Caucasian Infantry Division, and a battery of mountain guns. Finally, a total of 2000 men, equipped with around a dozen heavy artillery guns and supported by seven aircraft, formed up for a major attack on the two villages. The troops took Shali on 11 December and Goity on the morning of 12 December. The most important leaders of the rebellion, including Istamulov, were able to flee to the hills together with their armed followers. While units of the secret police and parts of the army subsequently continued to fight bandits south of Goity, other forces advanced to the mountainous south-eastern Nozhai-Yurtovskii district, where new unrest had been reported and where they conducted another major military operation from 20–27 December. Once again, however, they failed to apprehend the ringleaders. The price in blood was high on both sides: According to the army report, up to 60 Chechens were killed or wounded in the course of these operations. The army had suffered 21 dead and 22 wounded. In total, 450 people were arrested. The security forces confiscated hundreds of weapons.⁵⁶

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The situation down here is very critical, we are at war. In Ingushetia and Chechnya, revolts have broken out, many gangs of bandits have been organized, and they are taking the field against us under the slogan 'Down with Soviet Power.' We are moving out to destroy these gangs. – [signed] 'K', Natskavshkola, SKK.⁸⁴

The troops were concentrated in two theatres of operation: the Galanchozhskii district in the southern part of Chechnya and the intersection of the Itum-Kalinskii, Gudermesskii, Vedenskii and Nozhai-Yurtovskii districts.⁸⁵ When the security forces finally advanced on 16 March, the resistance was strongest in the Galanchozhskii district, where according to the army's report, around 500 armed fighters faced the troops. After heavy fighting, the army managed to break their resistance by 19 March, and 'the troops occupied the designated areas [*raiony*].'⁸⁶ The situation was different in the second operational area, where the army encountered 'only resistance from individual clusters of gangs'. Up until this time, the losses on the side of the security forces were accordingly limited: The army report speaks of 5 dead and 20 injured. There are no figures for the number of dead Chechens.⁸⁷

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It is likely that both the Chechens and the security forces suffered their heaviest losses not during the first phase of the military operation in mid-March, but in the subsequent engagements between the retreating armed groups and the security forces, which in Chechnya lasted well into April.¹⁰¹ Avtorkhanov's assertion that while fighting the security forces in spring of 1930 near Goity, the Chechens destroyed the entire 82nd Infantry Regiment, and even succeeded in annihilating 'an entire division' commanded by General Belov near Shali, a claim which has also been accepted uncritically in the Western literature, appears to be a complete exaggeration.¹⁰²

The suppression of the revolts in Chechnya and Dagestan in April and May of 1930 marked a temporary end to the period of major revolts in the North Caucasus. With the security forces already having largely destroyed the bases of Istamulov's resistance in the course of their March campaign, the Chechen department of the secret police managed to track him down in the vicinity of Shali *aul* and killed him on 20 June 1930.¹⁰³ This did not mean that banditry had been completely annihilated. Shita's brother Khusein remained at large and continued to lead the resistance well into the mid-1930s.

Even ordinary people were quite aware that the mountain areas of Chechnya and Dagestan remained dangerous places.