

Highland Rebels: The North Caucasus During the Stalinist Collectivization Campaign

Jeronim Perović

University of Zurich, Switzerland

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

Corresponding author:

Jeronim Perović, Department of History, University of Zurich, Karl Schmid-Strasse 4, CH-8006 Zürich, Switzerland.

Email: jeronim.perovic@hist.uzh.ch

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 Grozny 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

the military leadership, mostly they were drawn from the secret police and they used to have suffered their sentences in beating down Chechen Soviet leaders.⁸³

The Chechen leadership was only informed by directives of the operations, but was not involved in the preparations. The Chechen government was only ordered to improve its propaganda efforts among the population.⁸⁴ While preparations for the military operations were underway, military units were deployed, and movement patterns were established with additional troops. The Chechen government designed a detailed plan for carrying out mass arrests in the Chechen and in areas affected by the secret service intended to attract the general public about the savings of freedom in general and freedom, who was declared 'enemy of the people' in particular.

In total, the army high command drew up a force of almost 4000 troops by mid-March, which were then more equipped with heavy weapons and supported by an air force squadron. In terms of its nature and its targets, this operation was no less than a military invasion for the purpose of occupying enemy territory. At least this was the way it was perceived by those involved. For instance, we read in a letter from a soldier who participated in the operation:

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.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ 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*].'⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

⁸³ "Сводка о деятельности органов государственной безопасности в Чечено-Ингушской АССР за 1994 г.", 1995, с. 10.
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 ⁸⁵ "Сводка о деятельности органов государственной безопасности в Чечено-Ингушской АССР за 1994 г.", 1995, с. 10.
 ⁸⁶ "Сводка о деятельности органов государственной безопасности в Чечено-Ингушской АССР за 1994 г.", 1995, с. 10.
 ⁸⁷ "Сводка о деятельности органов государственной безопасности в Чечено-Ингушской АССР за 1994 г.", 1995, с. 10.
 ⁸⁸ "Сводка о деятельности органов государственной безопасности в Чечено-Ингушской АССР за 1994 г.", 1995, с. 10.

prompted by a letter from a soldier who was an immediate participant in the fighting in the southern part of Sogamoso in May 1930.

We created just 10 groups in 10 days. The birds took three days. It was very difficult. There were 40 men in our company, 10 of whom were killed by the headlamps every 40 men in the group. — Joseph W. and William W. Rogers, South America.¹⁰²