

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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major confrontations did not erupt in Dagestan until the beginning of April 1930.⁹⁴ In his missive, it was the Karachai region that Evdokimov identified as 'the worst affected place in terms of banditry', since practically the entire area settled by Karachaians was 'in the grip of revolt'. In order to reinforce the secret police forces and to oppose the advance of several hundred armed rebels towards the regional capital of Mikoian-Shakhar as well as other towns, even regular army units were withdrawn from Chechnya at short notice and redeployed to Karachai.⁹⁵ Evdokimov feared that if the situation there was not rapidly brought under control, there would be destabilizing effects on neighbouring Kabarda, where the security forces had only put down a major uprising a few days earlier, in the course of which 'more than a hundred' people had been killed, and hundreds had been arrested or had surrendered.⁹⁶

It is impossible to determine with certainty how many people were killed during the events of spring 1930. According to a secret police report, the security forces killed around 200 'bandits' in Karachai within 10 days of intense combat operations. Hundreds were arrested or surrendered.⁹⁷ The commander of the Red Army's North Caucasus military region, General Ivan P. Belov, reported in April 1930 that the fighting in Karachai and Chechnya had caused 24 deaths and 34 injuries on the side of the security forces, most of them Red Army soldiers. Altogether, 417 'bandits' were reported killed in Karachai. The report gives the number of Chechens killed as 19, but states that the true number was likely to be much higher, since the Chechens would often carry away their fallen and only leave them behind 'when they flee in panic due to pressure from the army and air force'.⁹⁸