



## **Russian Collectivization**

George Beers

Beers argues that collectivization in the Soviet Union did not lead to agricultural production but rather to a famine that killed millions and the terror unnecessarily imposed on the Kulaks.

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## Russian Collectivization

The novel, *Virgin Soil Upturned*, by Mikhail Sholokhov, portrays collectivization in the Soviet countryside as a relatively simple process. In his story, Davidov, a Soviet in charge of enforcing collectivization, is sent to Gremyachy. Upon his arrival, Davidov finds that the town is led by three communists. Improbably, Davidov was able to solve the collective problems as well as collectivize Gremyachy in one meeting. (1) Essentially, *Virgin Soil Upturned*, is a fictional representation of how collectivization and kulakization started. Sholokhov was a former soldier of the red army who later joined the communist party in 1932. In 1938, Sholokhov wrote a letter to Joseph Stalin concerning the abuse of the collective farmers. Clearly, Sholokhov is a peasant supporter thus his novel *Virgin Soil Upturned*, is considered a widely known novel in that it portrays a compassionate account of collectivization. (2) Sholokhov paints a fanciful picture of how the peasants embraced the idea of collectivization. Sholokhov also states that collectivization was a rather easy process that was formed without much trouble or terror. However, Sholokhov's novel is a direct misrepresentation of how life was in the Soviet countryside in the early twentieth century. This paper will discuss the facts about mass collectivization as well as Stalin's radical reaction to the peasant way of life post-emancipation. This paper will go on to explain that collectivization failed due to the fact that Stalin and his political followers felt that the process of collectivization in itself should be a cataclysmic event. Never the less, collectivization proved to be a failure since the process was dealt with in an untimely manner which led to Kulak resistance. The idea of collectivization began in 1925 in the Soviet countryside. Collectivization only took place in the countryside, it never affected the industrial cities; there was no need for collectivization to expand further than the countryside due to the fact that the main principal behind collectivization was for farmers to band together and combine their equipment/livestock and share the cost of production.

Stalin wanted to transform individual farms into large collective farms because he saw that the government was losing money to private traders. This required that the majority of farmers would have to work and live together on large state-run farms. Through these farms Stalin hoped to increase agricultural productivity, create grain reserves for Russia, and free many peasants for industrial work in the cities. In order to begin collectivization Stalin had about five million wealthier peasants, or kulaks, deported and/or killed and their equipment and livestock sent to collective farms. Many of the remaining peasants were forced into collective farms to work where they faced disease, starvation, and death. The effects of Stalin's collectivization resulted in mass disruption of agricultural productivity and incalculable human losses.

Joseph Stalin started to enforce his ideas of collectivization in May of 1928. Stalin's plan of collectivization contradicted Lenin's New Economic Policy or N.E.P, which allowed for the peasants to sell their crops independently. Lenin enforced the N.E.P after the emancipation to rebuild the agricultural economy; it was a rather successful program. The N.E.P allowed for the private selling of grain which led to the return of the successful economy that Russia had pre World War I. Stalin did away with this program stating "The pause has finished, and we are returning to socialism and communism." (3) Lenin's idea of N.E.P was viewed as a failure only by a few in that some felt that the N.E.P was a deviation and that Lenin negotiated with private enterprise.

Essentially, Stalin's idea of collectivization forced the peasants to move to a commune, share the livestock and equipment while running a farm considerately with others while giving the government their share of the revenue. Collectivism brought the idea of saving money for the government. The government figured that new technology, new farming machines, would allow mass production of food without the large amount of workers that were needed before. (4)

Collectivization under Stalin came to a halt when the Kulaks resisted his plan. The Kulaks, (wealthier peasants) did not want to give up the independence that they had since 1861. The Kulaks for the most part, fiercely refused to collectivize their farms and or cooperate in giving their grain harvest to the government.

Under collectivization, Stalin ordered that all grain which the Kulaks produced would be given up to the Bolsheviks. The Kulaks would also have to give up the land that they were entitled to after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and let the Soviet government become their landlords. Not only did the Kulaks have to give up their grain, they had to sell it to the government at a very low price. Fundamentally, the peasants lost their land, their rights and in essence their freedom.

All in all, the Kulaks refused to adhere to Stalin's plan, which caused Stalin to think of way to terminate the Kulaks all together. In November of 1928, Stalin stated his feelings about the Kulaks to the Bolsheviks giving off an anti Kulak feeling. Stalin was through with dealing with the Kulaks and their resistance. Stalin said, "It is not a matter of caressing the peasant and seeing in this the way to establish correct relations with him, for you won't go far on caresses..." (5)

Seven weeks later, almost fifty percent of the Soviet peasants were forcibly collectivized, by gunpoint. The Kulaks who refused to collectivize were faced with heavy taxation and difficult tasks left up to them to perform. One such encounter by a middle aged peasant wife states the conditions of collectivization:

"...I delivered fifteen poods of grain, and that's the most I can do... my husband is an old man of sixty-eight, unfit for work, and my boy is twelve, and I'm forty seven. The commission didn't take our circumstances into consideration..." (6)

Despite such penalties, the Kulaks continued to impede Stalin's plan of collectivization. Stalin had to come up with some other which was "Dekulakization". Dekulakization was the process of scattering the Kulaks onto the collective farms without their consent. Peasants viewed Dekulakization as serfdom all over again which led them to resist it all the more. Peasants would resist in ways that would delay agricultural production. Some forms of resistance included stealing, ignoring instructions, refusal to sow the field and overall sluggishness. (7) Some peasants went as far as destroying all of their crops and livestock. As punishment for their actions, the kulaks were sent to labor camps or even death camps. Stalin wanted to eliminate the Kulaks altogether. On his well-known speech given on December 27, 1929, Stalin stated that the Soviet party had "passed from the policy of restricting the exploiting tendencies of the kulaks to the policy of eliminating the kulaks as a class." (8) By 1930, the anti-kulak plan cost the lives of nearly three million people, yet the worst was yet to come.

Dekulakization forced the lower-class peasants to farm the fields although they did not have nearly as many of the farming skills as did the kulaks. Due to the resistance, there wasn't enough grain to farm thus leading the state of collectivization into a larger quandary. As a result, a famine occurred from 1932 until 1933. (9) The peasants were devastated by the famine and the government didn't do anything to help the situation. Mykola Pishy, a young kulak remembers a requisition squad approaching her mother to seize what ever food they had left:

"Please leave us something. We've got five children in the family. They'll die." The leader of the squad callously replied, "I don't care about your children. I care about my party-ticket." (10)

Perhaps the most heartbreaking account of the famine as a result of dekulakization was Alisa Maslo's account of the famine in her village: Alisa speaks of the horror she encountered when the Soviet squads came to her house:

"They went from house to house and they took away everything to the last grain... and this included ours. And they really left the family to certain famine death. And so my grandma died and then one of my brothers... And I told my mother that 'we're the only two left', that my brother was also dead...And so I became an orphan." (11)

The-year long famine led to the deaths of seven million people. Most outrageously, the famine was "man-made" and not caused by the weather what so ever. (12) Had Lenin's N.E.P plan still had been effect, none of this devastation would have happened.

In March of 1930, Stalin decided to back off on the idea of collectivization in his article published in Pravda called "Dizzy With Success." Pravda was a widely published newspaper that all the peasants read. In his article, Stalin stated that he never proposed that collectivization should have gotten out of hand as it did. One peasant reacted to Stalin's article stating the appalling aspects of collectivization:

"They strip the grain from everyone without exception, they do not take into consideration whether the peasant has surplus or not, and they've taken away two poods per month, including all that's need for the household... Life for a peasant, you can say is bad to the last degree." (13)

Stalin goes on to say that the blame for the harsh conditions of mass collectivization lies with the enforcers. Stalin further explains that he never wanted the enforcers to use guns or scare tactics to persuade the peasants to collectivize. Along with Stalin's article came the pause of collectivization until the summer of 1930. (14) Stalin decided to revive collectivization so that he could modernize the country side and create a hostile regime.

During the mid 1930's, peasants began to realize that collectivization would never be to their benefit. The government was taking all of their harvest and leaving them with nothing. Due to the barbaric actions by the Soviet government, the peasants failed to take initiative in the field thus producing less. (15) Nevertheless there were three main ways in which the Kulaks reacted to mass collectivization: The Kulaks could choose to accept collectivization on paper which in reality was falsifying records. If they agreed to it on paper, for the most part, they were left alone. The most popular way to defy was fierce resistance in which the Kulaks would assault the people who tried to collectivize. And finally, the Kulaks would defy collectivization by destroying their own livestock so that they wouldn't have to share with others. (16)

Part of the reason why the Kulaks were destructive was the fact that not only was the government taking everything away from them, they were doing what they pleased with the left over grain. The grain was left to spoil or exported; it was never used to feed the starving Kulaks. In fact, the consumption of crops in the field would lead a peasant to a Siberian Prison camp. The Kulaks would eat anything that they could to stay alive. One father was so desperate, he ate his own son to feed on his meat. (17)

By 1935, collectivization was proving itself to be a failure. Joseph Stalin was responsible for the deaths of eleven million people, and the incarceration of five million Kulaks in labor camps. All in all, the total death toll was estimated at fourteen and a half million people as a result of collectivization. In essence, Stalin did not care about the phenomenal death tolls and failure of collectivization. Stalin stated, "...it is now ridiculous and foolish to discourse at length on dekulakization. When the head is off, one does not mourn for the hair." (18) Stalin felt as though the failure of collectivization was due in part of the peasants' lack of experience in the fields as well as the resistance of the Kulaks. If the Kulaks had not resisted, they would have been able to assist the peasants in the fields.

It is no doubt that collectivization was a failure but one must wonder as to what would possess a leader like Stalin to enforce such a policy when the economy was running well under Lenin's N.E.P. plan. Perhaps, Stalin was so power hungry that he wanted total control over agricultural production and make it more prosperous. On the contrary, Stalin may have been worried about a possible peasant revolt so he enforced collectivization so he could have total control over his people. (19)

Unlike the portrayal by Sholokhov, mass collectivization was not a success in improving the agricultural tribulations or allow for the wealth and power to come to the Soviet Union. Collectivization, however, did prove that Joseph Stalin held an overwhelming amount of power over his people. Stalin's main goal was to improve his country's problems at no cost. Obviously, Stalin did not care about the lives lost at his hands. He further stated that, "A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic." (20)

Stalin used the idea of the Five Year Plans to make great strides in industrializing Russia. When he tried to equate that success with agricultural growth he met some resistance and ended up liquidating a class and causing famine. Socially, he gave some important social benefits to workers, but he also tried to purge the country and eliminated a lot of the Party, most of the army, and a good part of the workers and peasants. Stalin made several industrial improvements for his country, but that does not even begin to equal the death and destruction that he caused.

Collectivization lasted from 1928 until 1938, a decade of complete failure. Collectivization did not lead to agricultural production but rather to a famine that killed millions and the terror unnecessarily imposed on the Kulaks. Stalin's Five-Year Plan for collectivization failed in a number of ways. Millions of people died of starvation and disease, or the Bolsheviks murdered them. An undeterminable number of animals were killed unnecessarily, and/or starved because of lack of feed on the farms. Russia's agricultural sector suffered because there was not enough equipment, seed, livestock and manpower to meet the country's needs. Reports from the peasants confirmed the unspeakable conditions that the people and animals lived in. If Stalin had treated the farmers with decency and provided them with equipment, livestock, seed, and food the collective farms could have been more productive and there would have been less resistance from the Kulaks and peasants.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Sholokov, *Virgin Soil Upturned* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.) 11-23, 155-60.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/solohov.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Lewis and Phillip Whitehead, *Stalin: A Time for Judgement* (New York: Random House, 1990) 61.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 61

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary 1879-1929* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1973) 414.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism As A Way of Life: A Narrative In Documents\_* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000.) 46-53

<sup>7</sup> Shelia Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)5.

<sup>8</sup> Robert H. McNeal, *Stalin: Man and Ruler* (New York: New York University Press, 1988) 129.

<sup>9</sup> McNeal, 128-34.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 65.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 65-67.

<sup>13</sup> Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 46-53

<sup>14</sup> Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 46-53.

<sup>15</sup> Alex De Jonge, *Stalin and the Shaping of the Soviet Union* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986) 236.

<sup>16</sup> Fitzpatrick, 286-312.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 66-67.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis and Whitehead, 80.

<sup>19</sup> De Jonge, 236-237.

<sup>20</sup> [www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com)