Dekulakisation as mass violence

1) Context

Dekulakisation, or the “liquidation of the kulaks as a class”, was part of Stalin’s “second revolution” (or “revolution from above”), launched at the end of 1929 with the decision to collectivise millions of peasant households. The economic backwardness and political estrangement of the peasantry, which comprised the vast majority of the population of the Soviet Union, was the Achilles’ heel of Soviet power. The peasant’s support for the Bolshevik revolution, spurred on by the 8 November 1917 Decree on Land, granting the peasants’ demands for ownership of the land and fulfilling the dreams of rural Russia since the peasant uprisings of the 17th century, was short-lived. As early as 1918, as the Bolsheviks desperately needed to collect grain to secure their power and fight the civil war, forced grain collections by armed groups of Red Army soldiers and hastily armed workers’ detachments alienated the same peasant producers who had helped bring down the old tsarist order with their violent rebelliousness. The civil war in the countryside was brutal and lethal. Millions of peasants died in the conflict, some fighting on one side or the other, many simply caught in between the back and forth of the competing White and Red armies. The forced expropriation of grain and attempts to collectivise the countryside led to pitched battles between peasants and the new representatives of Soviet power. Peasant uprisings broke out in Ukraine, in the Tambov region, along the Volga and in Western Siberia. By the beginning of 1921, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had no choice but to retreat to the countryside. In March 1921, they introduced what was called the New Economic Policy (NEP), which called for a halt to the requisitioning of grain and allowed the peasants to accumulate and trade in grain products. Many historians consider the NEP period as simply a pause, a “truce” between the first major Bolshevik war against the peasantry (1919-1921) and the second and final one to follow (1929-1933) (Graziosi, 1996).

However, the context was different: whereas in 1920-21 large segments of the peasantry had actively resisted Bolshevik policy, in 1929-30 it was the pacified peasant society that was the target of the Stalinist revolution from above. To justify his attack, Stalin referred to the “threat” that “rich peasants”, labelled “kulaks”, posed to the very survival of the Soviet regime, which was supposedly being strangled by the kulaks’ deliberate refusal to sell their grain to the state. Stalin and many Party leaders were still traumatised by the threat of starvation experienced by many town dwellers during the civil war and wanted to ensure that such a possibility would never again recur.

The “dekulakisation” campaign begun in January 1930 had in reality a twofold objective: to “extract” (the term used in secret police directives) “elements” likely to resist the collectivisation of the countryside being undertaken at the same time; and to “colonise” the vast, inhospitable areas of Siberia, the Northern Region, the Urals and Kazakhstan. The first objective corresponded to the view, clearly expressed by the Bolsheviks when they took power, that peasant society contained “exploitative elements” that were irremediably hostile to the regime and that would sooner or later have to be “liquidated as a class”. In fact, Stalin merely repeated Lenin’s famous diatribes against the “kulaks”: since 1918, “kulaks”, an artificially constructed group, had been subjected to stereotyping and dehumanisation; they had been designated, in the press and propaganda, as “cockroaches”, “blood-suckers”, “vampires”, or just plain “scum”, “vermin” and “garbage” to be cleansed, crushed and liquidated (Colas, 1995). The official policy of “liquidation of the kulaks as a class”, adopted by the Stalinists at the end of 1929, did not, however, imply physical liquidation of all “kulaks”. The great majority of them were to be expropriated and deported, thus fulfilling the second objective of “dekulakisation”: to provide cheap labour for the colonisation and economic development of the country’s inhospitable areas, which were rich in natural resources. In three years (1930-1932), more than 5 million “kulaks” were either expropriated or reduced to poverty after having had to sell, hurriedly, their property (the authorities called this process “self-dekulakisation”); 2.3 million men, women and children were deported (of whom approximately half a million died
untimely deaths); over 300,000 were arrested and interned; between 20,000 and 30,000 were sentenced to death by extra-judicial courts.

2) Decision-making processes and implementation of the dekulakisation campaigns (1930-1932)

On 27 December 1929, Stalin publicly demanded “the eradication of all kulak tendencies and the elimination of the kulaks as a class”. A commission from the Politburo, chaired by Viatcheslav Molotov, was tasked with pursuing all measures needed to achieve this goal. On 30 January 1930, the commission issued a secret resolution defining three categories of “kulaks”:

- those “engaged in counterrevolutionary activities” (“first category”) were to be arrested and transferred to work camps or executed if they put up any resistance. Their families were to be deported and all their property confiscated. The resolution set a limit of 63,000 household heads in the “first category” (in fact, 284,000 persons were to be arrested during the first six months of the dekulakisation campaign as “kulaks of the first category, 20,000 of whom were sentenced to death by troïki, extra-judicial commissions);

- those “who manifested less active opposition to the Soviet state but were arch-exploiters and naturally supported counter-revolution”, placed in the “second category”, were to be arrested and deported with their families to remote areas of the Northern region, Siberia, the Urals and Kazakhstan. All their property – except the most essential domestic goods, a minimum amount of food and up to 500 rubles per family – was to be confiscated. The Molotov commission set, for a number of regions and republics, quotas of “second-category kulaks”: the total number was 154,000 households (in fact, 400,000 families were to be deported in 1930-1931);

- the remainder of the kulaks, described as “loyal to the regime” and classified in the “third category”, were to be expropriated and resettled on “land requiring improvement, outside the limits of the collective farm lands but within the administrative district in which they lived” (Davies, 1980; Ivnitskii, 1996; N.Werth, 1997).

It is important to note that the so-called “kulaks” were first and foremost defined in terms of families, not as individuals. Thus, not only were the head of the family and his wife considered “kulaks”, but also their children and, more broadly, all their relatives, young and old (elderly persons, children and infants constituted in fact the majority of the deported, and the majority of those who died untimely deaths, see section III).

Coordinated in each district by a troika (three-man commission) composed of the First Secretary of the local Party committee, the president of the local Soviet Executive Committee, and the head of the local GPU, operations were carried out, from the first days of February 1930, by special dekulakisation commissions and brigades.

These bodies comprised a mix of people: Communist Party activists from large factories mobilised and sent to the countryside especially for the occasion, local Communist functionaries, GPU (secret police) functionaries and various village “activists”. Sergo Ordjonikidze, one of Stalin’s closest advisers, explained in the following terms who these “activists” were: “Because there are almost no Party activists in most villages, we generally install a komsomol (member of the Communist Youth movement) in the village and force two or three poor peasants to join him, and it is this aktiv that personally carries out all of the village business of dekulakisation” (Graziosi, 1996).
True, the lists of first-category kulak households were drawn up exclusively by the GPU. The target figure of 63,000 first-category kulaks was met in less than two weeks. By 15 February 1930, according to a report addressed to Genrikh Yagoda, the GPU Deputy-Chief, 64,589 “kulaks in the first category” had already been arrested. Most of the victims appear to have been on index-cards catalogues of suspects assembled over the years by the GPU (Danilov & Berelowitch, 2003).

Lists of kulak in the other two categories were made on the spot at the recommendation of local authorities and village “activists”. The dekulakisation brigades had to meet the required quotas and, if possible, surpass them. This opened the door to all sorts of abuses and settling of old scores. Dekulakisation often became generalised plundering and ravaging (Lewin, 1966). Everyone in the village understood that “kulak” belongings were at the disposal of those willing to come forward and grab them. As noted in many GPU reports, this pushed “the villages’ criminal elements to join a nucleus of young and more or less enthusiastic believers”. According to a GPU report from Smolensk, “the brigades took from the wealthy peasants their winter clothes, their warm underclothes, and above all their shoes. They left the kulaks standing in their underwear and bare feet. They took everything, even old rubber shoes, women’s clothes, tea worth no more than 50 kopeks, water pitchers and pokers (…) They confiscated everything, even the pillows from under the heads of babies, and stole from the family pot, which they smeared on the icons they had smashed” (Fainsod, 1969). Dekulakised properties were usually simply looted or given away at auction: wooden houses were sold for 1 ruble, cows for 20 or 30 kopeks each, a hundredth of their real value.

The violence perpetrated by the dekulakisation gangs was horrific. “These people”, noted one GPU report, “drove the dekulakised naked in the streets, beat them, organized drinking-bouts in their houses, shot over their heads, forced them to dig their own graves, undressed women and searched them, stole valuables, money, etc. (Graziosi, 1996).

Deportations of “second-category kulaks” began as early as the second week of February 1930. According to a plan approved by the highest Communist Party authority, the Politburo, chaired by Stalin, 90,000 families were to be deported as part of a first phase that was to last until the end of April. The Northern region was to receive 45,000 families, the Urals, Siberia and Kazakhstan 15,000 each. In fact, during this first phase, which lasted until the end of May, over 99,000 families (510,000 people) were deported (Danilov & Berelowitch, vol.3/1, 2003). To carry out these arrests and deportations, military logistics, unprecedented in peacetime and mobilising hundreds of rail convoys and tens of thousands of special troops provided by the GPU, were set up. However, the vast scale of the project led to huge problems in coordinating the militarised deportation operations carried out by the GPU and the settlement of the deportees, which was left to the initiative of local authorities, which were overwhelmed by the task or simply indifferent to the fate of the dekulakised people. To transport the “dekulakised”, the GPU allocated, for the “first phase”, 280 convoys of 50 cattle trucks, each of them transporting between 1,500 and 2,000 men, women and children, and a limited amount of the deportees’ tools, food and personal belongings (each family was in theory allowed to take 25 puds – or 400 kg – of luggage, but many “dekulakised” had practically nothing to take with them after their homes had been looted). As the rather acerbic correspondence between the GPU and the People’s Commissariat of Transport demonstrates, the formation and progression of the convoys was invariably a painfully slow process. In the great depots, such as Vologda, Kotlas, Rostov, Sverdlovsk or Omsk, convoys would remain for weeks, filled with their human cargo. When railway convoys finally arrived at their destination, the interminable journey often continued for several hundred more kilometres on sledges (in winter), carts (in spring), or even on foot. In accordance with official instructions, deportees were to be “settled some way distant from any means of communication” (Danilov & Berelowitch, 2003). As the authorities in the district of Tomsk (Western Siberia) reported on 7 March 1930, “the deportees arrived on foot, since we have no spare horses, sleighs or harnesses. (…) In view of the present situation, it has been impossible to transport the two months’ supplies that the kulaks are entitled to bring with them” (Danilov & Krasilnikov, vol.1, 1993). It was therefore without provisions or tools, and often without any shelter, that the deportees had to begin their new lives. One report from the province of Arkhangelsk in September 1930 admitted that of the planned 1,641 living quarters for the deportees, only seven had been built. Hundreds of thousands were left to their fate on the steppes or in the middle of marshy pine forests without regular food supplies or work. The fortunate ones who had been able to bring some
tools with them could build some sort of rudimentary shelter, often the traditional zemlianka, a simple hole in the ground covered with branches.

Epidemics and acute shortages (and even, in some cases, famine) decimated the deportees, first of all the children and the elderly (see section III, Victims). Amidst this deadly chaos, the strongest and most resolute escaped (for example, 15% of the 230,000 “dekulakised” deported to the Northern region had escaped by December 1930). GPU reports mentioned another serious problem: by the end of 1930, fewer than 10% of adult deportees had been put to work (Viola, 2007).

A few days before the launching of a second wave of “dekulakisation”, aimed at “totally cleansing the kulaks from all agricultural regions” (secret telegram sent by G. Iagoda to all republican and regional GPU plenipotentiaries on 15 March 1931, in Danilov & Berelowitch, vol. 3/1, 2003), the Politburo established, on 11 March 1931, a special commission chaired by V. Andreev, member of the Politburo, with G. Iagoda playing a key role. The first objective of the Andreev commission was to “halt the dreadful mess of the deportation of manpower” and to “organise a rational and effective management of the deported workforce”. Preliminary enquiries by the commission revealed that the productivity of the deported workforce was almost zero. Of the 200,000 “dekulakised” people deported to the Urals, a mere 8% were detailed to “productive activities” in April 1931. All other able-bodied adults were “just trying to survive”. The Andreev commission reorganised the management of the deportees by granting the GPU power over the organisation and supervision of all the stages of the deportation and settling of the deportees. A whole network of komandatury, run by the GPU, was set up to supervise and organise all aspects of the everyday life and working conditions of the deportees. Deportees, known in the police jargon as spetzposelentsy (“special displaced persons”) were stripped of their civil rights, forced to reside in designated areas (called spetzposelki, or “special settlements”) and subjected to a veritable forced labour in agricultural, industrial or mining structures controlled by the GPU. The GPU also rented the deportees under its control, in exchange for a commission, to a number of state-run industrial enterprises, such as Urallesprom (forestry), Uralugol, Vostugol (coal mining) and Tsvetmetzoloto (non-ferrous minerals, gold), exploiting the various natural resources in the northern and eastern parts of the USSR. These companies were to provide living quarters for their workers, schooling for children, and a regular supply of food for all. In reality, their managers usually treated this slave workforce as a source of free labour. The deportees were expected to produce 30-50% more than the free workers, and their pay (when they were paid at all) was pitiful (Danilov & Krasilnikov, 1994).

While the Andreev commission was trying to rationalise the economic exploitation of the deportees, the Politburo was drawing up grandiose plans for the deportation of 200,000 to 300,000 kulak families, mainly to Western Siberia and Kazakhstan (Danilov, 2001, vol.3). This second wave of deportation began in early May 1931, and lasted for nearly five months. According to a GPU report dated 30 September 1931, 265,795 “kulak families” (1,243,860 persons) were deported, more than twice as many as in 1930, which was, until recently, seen as the apex of the “dekulakisation” campaign. True enough, the second-wave deportations appear to have been carried out more efficiently than those of the first wave in 1930: there were fewer cases of deportees being simply abandoned in the taiga or the steppe; most of them were allocated to construction sites, mines or forestry (Danilov & Berelowitch, 2003).

Deportations continued in 1932-1933, but at a slower pace. The 1932 plan for deportations of kulaks, discussed by the Politburo in April 1932, foreshadowed the banishment of 38,000 families in May-August. This plan was, however, not “fulfilled”: only 71,000 people were registered as “newcomers” in the 1932 registers of the GPU-run spetzposelki. A further 268,000 peasants were deported the following year, in 1933 (V.Zemskov, 2003).

The number of people deported to distant regions during the 1930-1933 dekulakisation campaigns accordingly works out at about 2.3 million. On top of this, we must add those who were shipped directly to the gulags (the so-called first-category kulaks): approximately 300,000 to 350,000 people (Danilov & Berelowitch, 2003).
3) Victims

During the 1920s, Party theorists and state officials tried hard to define criteria to identify the “kulaks”. A few months before the launching of the dekulakisation campaign, the Sovnarkom (the Council of People’s Commissars, i.e. the Soviet government) suggested the following five features by which a kulak farm might be identified (a single one of these features was sufficient for people to be categorised as “kulaks”):

1- A farm that regularly hires waged labour;

2- A farm possessing an “industrial undertaking”, such as a mill, a butter-making establishment, a wool-combing installation, etc.;

3- A farm that hires out power-driven agricultural machinery;

4- A farm that hires out premises;

5- A farm whose members are involved in commercial activities or who have income not deriving from work (Lewin, 1966).

Several of the definitions were disquietingly vague, above all “other income not deriving from work”. Given the context of the dekulakisation campaign, especially the effects of a frantic propaganda campaign that constantly exaggerated the enemy’s cunning, treachery and skill in concealing himself, it was easy for zealous and vigilant executants to find “kulaks” wherever they chose to look. Dekulakisation brigades resorted to outdated and often-incomplete tax returns kept by the rural soviets, information provided by the GPU, and denunciations by neighbours tempted by the possibility of gain. Peasants were arrested as “kulaks” and deported for having sold grain on the market or for having had an employee to help with the harvest back in 1925 or 1926, for possessing two samovars or for having killed a pig in September 1929 “with the intention of consuming it themselves and thus keeping it away from socialist appropriation”. Peasants were labelled “kulaks” on the pretext that they had “speculated”, when all they had done was sell something of their own making. Peasants were deported on the pretext that some of their relatives had fought in the White Army or because of their “numerous visits to the church”. Many people were labelled “kulaks” simply on the grounds that they resisted collectivisation (Fainsod, 1969; Davies, 1980; Lewin, 1966). In fact, dekulakisation often turned into social cleansing of all “socially alien elements”, among whom featured “police officers of the Tsarist regime”, “White officers”, former landlords and shopkeepers, members of the “rural intelligentsia” (among them many teachers), many of whom had joined the SR (socialist-revolutionary) party in 1917-18. One of the few GPU reports giving details on the socioprofessional occupations of dekulakised people during the first stage of the campaign (Volga region, February 1930) shows that the so-called kulaks represented only 55% of the total; the “middle peasants” (seredniaks) accounted for 15%; shopkeepers 15%; priests, monks and nuns 6%; teachers and other members of the rural intelligentsia 4%; and “others” 5% (Danilov & Berelowitch, 2003).

How many “kulaks” died in the course of “de-kulakization”? On 1 January 1932, the GPU carried out a general census of all deportees: it listed 1,317,022 people. We know, by the same police sources, that nearly 1.8 million “kulaks” were deported during the two main deportation waves in 1930 and 1931. Losses accordingly numbered close to half a million people, or nearly 30% of all deportees. Undoubtedly, a not insignificant proportion of those had escaped. In 1932, the GPU komandatury, which actually managed to keep accurate records of the deportees they were supposed to keep
4) Dekulakisation: “class genocide”? 

Was dekulakisation “class genocide”? This classification was first proposed in 1997 by Stéphane Courtois, in his introduction to The Black Book of Communism. “The death from starvation of the child of a Ukrainian kulak is ‘equivalent’ to the death from starvation of a Jewish child in the Warsaw ghetto”, he writes (Courtois et. al, 1997). Is this process of equating “class genocide” with “racial genocide” really sustainable? It is important to note that, in Courtois’s argument, two very different forms of mass violence are lumped together: the “liquidation of the kulaks as a class” (1930-32) and the Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, which affected all the peasants in the collective farms of that Soviet republic. A number of factors lead us to be very doubtful about the applicability of the term “class genocide” when applied to the kulaks. Although the kulaks, as an artificially designated and constructed group, were subjected to the kind of dehumanisation and stereotyping that was common for victims of genocide throughout the 20th century, the regime did, from the outset, introduce distinctions within the victim group (first, second and third categories). “Liquidation of the kulaks as a class” did not imply physical liquidation of all kulaks, even though the terrible conditions in which the deportation took place and the “settlement” of the kulaks, who, at least in the first stages of the dekulakisation operations, were often abandoned in the middle of the taiga or the desert steppes, caused a very high rate of mortality that sometimes reached 15% per annum (and much higher in the case of children). It is also clear that the sociological defining lines of the “kulak” group are not just flexible, but in fact are not definitions at all. Genocide is said to occur when a group is targeted in terms of what essentially defines it: the criterion of the group’s stability must be existent for the qualification of genocide be applicable, and in the case of dekulakisation, this is manifestly not the case. Moreover, contrary to Soljenitsyn’s assertion (“children of kulaks carried the mark of Cain throughout their lives”), the pariah-status of the dekulakised was not carried forward to the next generation: from 1938 onwards, children of kulaks who reached the age of 16 were allowed to leave their place of deportation if they continued their schooling beyond the required age. Three years later, hundreds of thousands of children of kulaks were mobilised into the Red Army. Such integration into the army ipso facto removed all the legal discrimination that had been imposed on children of kulaks, even though their parents continued to be second-class citizens (Zemskov, 2003). There was clearly some commitment to the idea of “nurture” over “nature” in the Stalinist social engineering project (Weiner, 2003). On the other hand, we should not forget that several hundred thousand “former kulaks” – many of whom had fled from the “special settlements” to which they had been deported – were arrested during the “Great Terror” of 1937-38. The largest “mass secret operation”, launched by NKVD Order N°00447 dated 30 July 1937, specifically targeted, among other categories, “former kulaks, deported in previous years, who have escaped from the special settlements”. In the course of this “secret operation”, which lasted 15 months (August 1937-November 1938), over 800,000 people were arrested and sentenced, of whom over 400,000 were executed. It is generally believed that former kulaks (both those who had fled from the “special settlements” and those who were still living there) contributed to approximately one quarter of the victims of Order N°00447. In many ways, this “mass operation” was the last blow against the hated “kulaks”, the last act of the dekulakisation launched eight years earlier (Shearer, 2009; Werth,
5) Selected bibliography


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