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Trial run: the deportation of the Terek Cossacks, 1920

We have definitely decided to expel 18 *stanitsas* along this side of the Terek with a population of 60,000 to Stavropol' *guberniia*. How can we do this? No government whatsoever can simply drive them away. In fact we have done this in relation to three *stanitsas*, but we had to suppress a revolt there. (Now this matter has been resolved and places have been fixed for their resettlement.)

G.K. (Sergo) Ordzhonikidze¹

Sergo Ordzhonikidze's speech to a congress of the Don and Caucasus party organisations in Vladikavkaz on 29 October 1920 was one of the very few public mentions at the time, and indeed throughout the existence of the Soviet regime, of a momentous operation that had been underway fitfully since the spring of 1920, but expanded dramatically in the autumn. It was the only precise reference, overt or veiled, to the intended scale of the deportations, involving almost a quarter of the entire Terek Cossack population.² The deportations began in April 1920 but ended abruptly in January 1921 before they were completed. By the end of the operation all the inhabitants of nine *stanitsas*, approximately 30,000 people, had been expelled.³ The first mass deportation in Soviet history was followed almost immediately by similar operations in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and the following year in Tambov province.⁴ Deportation, which was to become emblematic of the Stalin years, was already a routine policy tool by 1921.

¹ G.K. Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi* (Groznyi, 1962), p.104.

² In 1914 the Terek Cossacks numbered 234,692 out of a total population of 1,235,223. R.Kh. Gugov, *Sovmestnaia Bor'ba Narodov Tereka za Sovetskuiu Vlast'* (Nal'chik, 1975), pp. 26–7.

³ *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii* (RGASPI) f. 64, opl. 1, d. 247, ll. 105–6. Given the situation at the time these and subsequent population figures must be treated with caution. My sense is that they are broadly accurate if not exact. The total of 30,677 in this file is an underestimate though, as it did not include Assinovskaia, the last *stanitsa* to be deported.

⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923–1939* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 59–61; N.F. Bugai, *Kazachestvo Rossii: Ottozhenie, Priznanie, Bozrozhdenie (1917–90 gody)* (Moscow, 2000), p. 42.

The deportations have long been known, but little investigated. In Soviet times they were hardly ever mentioned. Since the end of the Soviet Union reference to the Terek deportations has appeared in many works in Russia and abroad.⁵ A small selection of the documents relating to the deportations was published in Russia in 2004.⁶ None of the publications, however, provides a comprehensive account of the deportations. Figures vary as to the number of *stanitsas* deported, the number of people involved, and in particular as to the scope of the operation. There is virtually nothing about the precise circumstances in which the deportations were initiated and carried out, nor has the key role of Sergo Ordzhonikidze been fully evaluated. The significance of the deportations in the short and long term extends far beyond the relatively small number of people involved, and this too needs to be explored.

The significance of the deportations

The deportation of a quarter of the Terek Cossack population was an attempt by the Soviet state to produce an immediate and permanent solution to the strife wracking the former Terek Voisko, or as it became known from 1920 the Autonomous Mountain Republic. At the core of this strife was a savage ethnic war between the Terek Cossacks and the Chechen and Ingush peoples. Revolution and civil war only made an already intractable problem worse: both sides actively sought the expulsion, and preferably destruction, of the other and the aid of the Soviet state in doing so. The new Soviet state, however, had its own agenda in the region, which sometimes coincided with the interests of one community, sometimes with the other, and often

⁵ See for example N.F. Bugai and A.M. Gonov, *Kavkaz: Narody v Eshelonakh (20–60-e gody)* (Moscow, 1998), pp. 81–8; Bugai, *Kazachestvo Rossii*, pp. 25–36; V.D. Dzidoev, *Belyi i Krasnyi Terror na Severnom Kavkaze v 1917–1918 godakh* (Vladikavkaz, 2000), pp. 123–4; Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, pp. 60–1.

⁶ *Shpion* 1(1994), pp. 47–54.

with neither. The state's priorities were not constant, and indeed were subject to abrupt changes with potentially catastrophic consequences for both communities.

Important as the Terek deportations were to the communities and territories where they took place, their significance extends beyond this. They illuminate important facets of the early Soviet regime. The deportations clarify continuities and discontinuities with tsarist policies, particularly in a colonial setting;⁷ they connect Soviet policy to the mainstream of European colonial practices less than three years after the October Revolution;⁸ they reflect the total mobilisation of societies during the First World War and continued in the case of Russia during the civil war.⁹

However, the deportations also have a distinctly Soviet context. On a practical level they are part of a tradition, already established during the civil war, of radical policies launched without preparation or planning, demanding that Soviet officials improvise solutions on the spot.¹⁰ They indicate that mass violence against the civilian population was not just a response to a military emergency, but had become a permanent part of Soviet political culture. The deportations also emphasise the critical importance of individuals situated strategically in the Soviet power structure in formulating and carrying out policy.¹¹

⁷ Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), pp. 22–32; Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire* (London: Longman, 2001), pp. 179–85.

⁸ Peter Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia', in Ronald G. Suny and Terry Martin (eds), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 111–44.

⁹ Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract and to Exterminate', pp. 124–6.; Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 121–65.

¹⁰ See for example Judith Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 4–9.

¹¹ A.V. Kvashonkin, 'Sovetizatsiia Zakavkaz'ia v Perepiske Bol'shevistskogo Rukovodstva 1920–22', in *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 38, 1997, pp. 164–5; Gerald M. Easter, *Reconstructing the State: Personal Networks and Elite Identity in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 13–16.

On another level the deportations reflect the conflation of ethnic identity and political loyalty that developed under the tsarist government during the war, and which the Soviet state had begun to adopt, particularly with regard to the Cossacks.¹² Indeed, the Terek deportations marked a significant intensification of these tendencies, admitting no exceptions whatsoever. Finally, the deportations sprang from the millenarian strand in Bolshevik ideology, which constantly sought to reduce highly complex problems to binary opposites, allowing for simple but drastic solutions.¹³

In the midst of the great themes of colonialism, wartime mobilisation, and ideology, one should not lose sight of the subordinate populations at the heart of the Terek tragedy. They too had their own agendas in the cause of which they hoped to enlist the support of the powerful new state. They did not wait passively for their fates to be decided by the new overarching imperial power, but through their desires, actions, and reactions helped shape Soviet policy – although not always in the ways they wanted.

Tsarist policy in the North Caucasus

Until the mid-nineteenth century Tsarist policy consisted of a half-hearted attempted to assimilate the population of the North Caucasus by demonstrating the manifest superiority of Russian culture. Their chosen target was the Terek Cossack population, but far from acting as a conduit for Russian influence the Cossacks appeared much more receptive to the indigenous cultures of the North Caucasus.¹⁴ In the early nineteenth century the government began to abandon assimilation and to experiment

¹² Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 174–9.

¹³ Igor Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 78–84.

¹⁴ Tom Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700–1860* (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1999), p. 6.

with expulsion.¹⁵ This was not fully developed until the second half of the nineteenth century, but it marked an important change in tsarist policies toward colonial peoples. The campaign launched in 1863–4 in the Western Caucasus had as its primary goal not the conquest and occupation of the territory, but the expulsion of the population. By the time it was over almost 500,000 people had been expelled from their homes.¹⁶

Government policy shifted from assimilation to expulsion in the light of heightened concern about its ability to defend the empire's borders in the aftermath of the Crimean War and fears of new European war. Both were compounded by what was perceived as the irreversible hostility of the non-Russian population of the borderlands, particularly the Poles on the western borders and the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus.¹⁷ Russian policy in the North Caucasus drew on contemporary European practices which allowed colonial peoples to be expelled and deported, although as yet no-one had applied them to European peoples.¹⁸

The Terek Voisko before 1914

The Terek Voisko was reorganised in 1860 as part of the on-going subjugation of the North Caucasus. The mountainous terrain and the fierce opposition of the Chechen and Ingush peoples to the conquest convinced the government to expel the indigenous population rather than engage in a protracted and costly military occupation and in an

¹⁵ T.Kh. Kumykov (ed.), *Problemy Kavkazskoi Voinyi Vycelenie Cherkesov v Predely Osmanskoi Imperii (20–70-e gg XIX V)* (Nal'chik, 2001), pp. 12–15.

¹⁶ Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazskoi Voinyi*, p. 22.

¹⁷ William C. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 279–80.

¹⁸ Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract and to Exterminate', p. 116. The Irish and the Jews are exceptions to this, having been subject to waves of deportation since the fifteenth century. Although geographically European, in many respects these were regarded as colonial peoples, the Irish in particular providing a model for later British policy. See Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 2–3. I am grateful to one of the readers at Cardiff, Prof. Greg Benton for bringing this to my attention.

attempt to pacify the territory.¹⁹ Tsar Alexander II's chief minister, Loris-Melikov, justified this policy on the grounds that it 'would once and for all free us from our onerous position in Chechnia.'²⁰ Over 20,000 Chechen families were forcibly driven into the Ottoman Empire in 1865.²¹ Other Chechen and Ingush suffered eviction from their homes and expropriation of their property, but contrived to remain within the Terek territory, living under a virtual military dictatorship.²² The Cossacks were the prime beneficiaries of this policy, rewarded for their loyalty with the land and property of the expelled Chechens.²³ The Sunzhenskaia line, the focus of the Soviet deportations, was established on the lands vacated by the Chechen and Ingush.²⁴

Contrary to the expectations of Loris-Melikov, the policy of expulsions and expropriations did not establish ethnic harmony. Far from the clean lines and ethnically compact areas envisaged by him, an even more variegated mosaic emerged, with Cossack *stanitsas* and Chechen and Ingush *auls* existing in close proximity. Living in sight of the land that they or their fathers had owned only deepened the rage of the dispossessed, and the passage of time did not reconcile them to their loss. In 1921 Chechen and Ingush representatives told a Soviet commission of enquiry into the situation in the Mountain Republic:

There was a time when our forefathers had rich and fertile lands. But they were ripped from us by force of arms by black tsarist generals and their stooges; and the mountain peoples were driven on to the bare and infertile slopes... we say expand our territory, expel the Cossacks from their *stanitsas*.²⁵

¹⁹ Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazkoi Voiny*, pp. 14–15.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazkoi Voiny*, p. 21.

²² Gugov, *Sovmestnaia Bor'ba Narodov Tereka*, p. 55.

²³ Kappeler, *The Russian Empire*, p. 184; Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire*, pp. 23–4.

²⁴ Dzidzoev, *Belyi i Krasnyi Terror*, p. 34.

²⁵ *Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (hereafter GARF) f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 174.

Tsarist policy had neither achieved ethnic peace, nor enhanced internal and external security through the expulsions. In fact it had achieved precisely the opposite. The empire bequeathed the problem to its successor. A solution was to remain as elusive to the Soviet as it had to the tsarist regime.

Revolution and civil war

The October Revolution unleashed the long-suppressed conflict in the Terek Voisko. Fighting in the territory was merciless from the outset. Tsarist legacies of expulsion, expropriation, and mass violence provided an example to both communities of how to conduct an ethnic conflict.²⁶ What made any compromise impossible, however, was the torrent of violence unleashed by the civil war. In 1918 the Cossack elites offered to ally with the Soviet state if it would commit to an even more brutal colonial war against the Chechen and Ingush.²⁷ The Chechen and Ingush saw in the Soviet state the means to regain their ancestral lands. A delegation of Ingush to a Soviet commission in 1918 announced:

We the Ingush of the village Ekadzhiev and almost all the Ingush people stand on a platform of Soviet power. We Ingush, not only of the village Ekadzhiev, but all the Ingush will defend Soviet power not only to the smallest child, but to the last drop of blood.²⁸

Ordzhonikidze acknowledged in a report to the Council of Ministers in 1919 that, ‘this recognition of Soviet power by both sides took place purely for tactical reasons.’²⁹

The new Soviet government tried to orientate itself between the different factions, forging alliances and recruiting soldiers for its cause. Ordzhonikidze

²⁶ Dzidoev, *Belyi i Krasnyi Terror*, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁸ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, ll. 3–4.

²⁹ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 65.

expressed the instinctive sympathy of the party and government for the Chechens and Ingush in his analysis of the political situation to the Council of Ministers:

Here we have on the one hand the land-rich, wealthy Cossacks, enjoying all rights in the past – ‘peasant landlords’ if we might express it so – on the other hand the *inogorodnie* (outsider) population and highlanders who were without lands and rights in the past. All the non-Cossack population in the past in the North Caucasus was in complete political subordination to the Cossacks and this in spite of the fact that the Cossacks consisted of not more than a fifth of the total population of the North Caucasus.³⁰

This instinctive sympathy, however, had to be balanced with the need to keep the option of attracting Cossacks to the Soviet side open. Many Cossacks did indeed fight with the Red Army and Ordzhonikidze frequently singled them out for praise in his reports on the civil war in the North Caucasus.³¹

All parties conducted themselves in a particularly brutal manner from the start of the civil war. Attacks on the civilian population, the burning of settlements, and the expulsion of entire communities became standard practice. Between November 1917 and the spring of 1918 three Cossack *stanitsas*, Fel'marshal'skaia, Khakhanovskaia, and Ilynskaia were destroyed by the Ingush, forcing over 4,000 people to flee their homes.³² The Cossacks likewise sought the physical removal of the indigenous population, consciously resorting to terror to achieve this.³³ After the fall of Grozny to the Volunteer Army in 1919, the victorious Whites hanged more than 2,000 people.³⁴ The indiscriminate mass violence of the civil war demolished any lingering barriers confining the war to combatants or even to adult males. Women, children, and the

³⁰ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, pp. 60–1.

³¹ For example on 7 February 1919 he telegraphed to Lenin that, ‘the Cossacks of the Sunzhenskaia Line under the command of c[omrade] D'iakov are standing firm for Soviet power, threatening with artillery counter-revolutionary *stanitsas*.’ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 58.

³² RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, ll. 104–6.

³³ Dzidoev, *Belyi i Krasnyi Terror*, p. 88.

³⁴ Gugov, *Sovetskaia Bor'ba Narodov Tereka*, p. 359.

aged were all targets whose destruction was deemed as necessary, and as legitimate as the destruction of opposing armies.

In the spring of 1920 the Red Army began the decisive reoccupation of the North Caucasus. Despite its near complete triumph over the White armies, the strategic situation of the regime remained perilous. Its armed forces were stretched thinly around the former empire. Conflict was already looming with the Transcaucasian states where the British and the Turks were actively working to consolidate their spheres of influence.³⁵ In April 1920 war broke out with Poland, and in the summer of that year the last White commander, General Wrangel, attempted to reignite the civil war in the North Caucasus by launching a seaborne attack across the Black Sea on the Taman peninsular, thereby hoping to draw the Cossacks of the Kuban and Terek back into the struggle.³⁶ Within the former empire, Soviet control outside the cities was tenuous as peasants violently resisted the grain requisitioning policies of the state. Surrounded by enemies from without and within, a sense of insecurity and paranoia pervaded the regime and its officials.

Soviet forces responsible for occupying the North Caucasus were under the command of Sergo Ordzhonikidze, compatriot and close ally of Stalin. Ordzhonikidze was appointed head of the Caucasian section of the Party, or *Kavbiuro*, which had authority over all Soviet institutions and personnel in the North Caucasus.³⁷ Lenin had cabled Ordzhonikidze personally: ‘concerning the land question you can act independently. Advise, however, any measures taken by you in this area.’³⁸ Answerable in theory to the *Politbiuro*, Ordzhonikidze was in effect a free agent in the North Caucasus, enjoying exceptional latitude to formulate and implement his

³⁵ Kvashonkin, ‘Sovetizatsiia Zakavkaz’ia’, pp. 165–6.

³⁶ Bugai, *Kazachestvo Rossii*, p. 88–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁸ V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (5th edn, Moscow, 1967–70), vol. 51, p. 178.

own policy in the territory. It was an opportunity ideally suited to a man of Ordzhonikidze's temperament.³⁹

The revolt of the Sunzhenskaia line

In September 1920 an armed revolt against Soviet power broke out among five Cossack *stanitsas* on the Sunzhenskaia line of the Terek. The Cossacks cut the main railway line, blew up bridges, and shot upon some trains.⁴⁰ On one level this was no different from hundreds of other revolts against Soviet power that took place at the same time. Yet the authorities regarded the revolt as part of a seamless attack on the Soviet state orchestrated by its enemies.⁴¹ A member of Ordzhonikidze's staff recalled: 'in the autumn of 1920 the English imperialist unified all the counter revolutionary elements including the Terek and Sunzhenskoe white Cossacks against Soviet power.'⁴² It is possible that Ordzhonikidze took the revolt as a personal insult since one of the trains attacked by the Cossacks had been carrying delegates from the Congress of the People's of the East which had just taken place in Baku. On the train were such national figures as Mikoian and such international ones as Bela Kun and John Reed. In his memoirs Mikoian relates how Ordzhonikidze sent his personal armoured train to ensure the further safe passage of the delegates.⁴³

Whatever the cause, the fury with which Ordzhonikidze reacted in the order issued on 23 October 1920 is still palpable almost ninety years later:

Cossacks of the Terek district, the Terek and Sunzhenskaia lines have repeatedly organised rebellions against Soviet power. The traitors fell on separate units of the Red

³⁹ For a discussion of Ordzhonikidze's character see Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *In Stalin's Shadow: The Career of "Sergo Ordzhonikidze"*, trans. David Nordlander (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 17–20 and Dzidzoev, *Beloi i Krasnoi Terror*, p. 146.

⁴⁰ RGASPI f. 85, op. 11, d. 1 31, l. 12.

⁴¹ Bugai, *Kazachestvo Rossii*, pp. 88–90.

⁴² R. G. Seiraniat (ed.), *O Sergo Ordzhonikidze: Vospominaniia, Ocherki i Stat'i Sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1981), p. 103.

⁴³ A.I. Mikoian, *V Nachale Dvadtsatykh* (Moscow, 1985), p. 10.

Army, shooting up a passenger train, sabotaging the railroad, bridges etc. Suppressing these rebellions with an armed fist, the representatives of Soviet power on the Terek were absolutely humanitarian, even in relation to the rebel *stanitsas*. The most recent events, the uprising of Kalinovskaia *stanitsa* on the Terek, of Ermolovskaia, of Zakan-Iurtskaia/Romanovskaia, Samashkinskaia and Mikhailovskaia on the Sunzha, have overfilled the cup of the peace-loving, long suffering Soviet power. Member of the Revolutionary Council of the Kavfront, Com Ordzhonikidze orders the following: First Kalinovskaia *stanitsa* – burn it. Second *stanitsas* Ermolovskaia, Zakan-Iurtovskaia/Romanovskaia, Samashkinskaia and Mikhailovskaia to be given to the poorest, landless population and in the first place to the Chechen people who have always been devoted to Soviet power.⁴⁴

Ordzhonikidze then spelt out what was to happen to the Cossack population of the *stanitsas*:

All the male population from 18–50 of the aforementioned *stanitsas* to be loaded on to special trains and sent under escort to the north for heavy forced labour. Old people, women, and children are to be evicted from the *stanitsa*, but are permitted to resettle in *stanitsas* and *khutora* in the north. Horses, sheep, and other livestock and any property suitable for the army to be given to the Kavtrudarmy and its corresponding organisations.⁴⁵

Ordzhonikidze ended with a warning: ‘All commanders and commissars are to declare to the entire Cossack population that in future for any infringement whatsoever against Soviet power and also for attempts at rebellion they will receive exactly the same punishment.’ The men from Kalinovskaia were sent to Arkhangelsk in the far north whilst the men from the other *stanitsas* were sent to the mines of the Donbass.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ RGASPI f. 85, op. 11, d. 131, ll. 12–13.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 210; RGASPI f. 85, op. 11, d. 131, l. 1.

The process of deportation

The order from Ordzhonikidze led to the creation of a commission in each *stanitsa* to carry out the evictions and deportations. The commissions were under the overall command of one of Ordzhonikidze's trusted subordinates, Vrachev, and he was responsible for organising the deportation of approximately 22,000 people – the entire population of the five *stanitsas*.⁴⁷ His priority was to remove the adult males and this appears to have been done swiftly. At the first meeting of Vrachev's commission in late October he reported, 'the evictions of the men have began and without particular obstacles should be completed within a very few days.'⁴⁸ After the men had gone, there still remained over 14,000 women, children, and elderly people.⁴⁹ Evicting these people, however, turned out to be much more complicated.

The order from Ordzhonikidze stipulated that the Cossacks were to be stripped of their property, evicted from their homes, and deported, but provided no details on how any of this was to be done. Officials carrying out the deportation had to improvise as it was under way. Not surprisingly, things began to go awry almost immediately. Lines of communications between the different branches and layers of the bureaucracy broke down, leaving Ordzhonikidze's immediate subordinates Kirov, Kvirikeliia, and Kosior completely in the dark as to what was going on. A conversation by direct wire between Kvirikeliia and Kosior on 3 November 1920 clarified only the degree of chaos engulfing the operation:

C. Kvirikeliia: For the last few days we have had no information whatsoever about the course of the evictions. I and Kirov request you to inform us in more detail if possible how the business of deporting the Cossacks is progressing.

C. Kosior... please make clear the following matter. From the Oblast

⁴⁷ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, ll. 104–6.

⁴⁸ *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv* (hereafter RGVA) f. 217, op. 5, d. 1, l. 1.

⁴⁹ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 107.

Ispolkom we have not received any information relating to the resettlement of the expelled and the commission which has as its task the eviction of the 5 *stanitsas* finds itself in complete ignorance of where to resettle the evicted, who is to be responsible for them and who to give orders to. If the commission resettles the Cossacks on its own responsibility, then it is unavoidable that the work will be chaotic and possibly it will be necessary to do it again.⁵⁰

Characteristically, the solution to the problem was seen as inserting another layer of bureaucracy into the operation in the form of a new commission. This commission, which began work on 3 November 1920, had some strategic sense of what was necessary and took a much more robust attitude to coordinating the different branches of the bureaucracy. It was shocked to find that Vrachev's commission had not bothered to count the number of deportees and in some cases had simply loaded them onto trains without the least idea of where they were being taken.⁵¹ Imposing its will on the plethora of organisations involved in the deportation did not prove easy.

What in other circumstances might have been a black farce had desperate consequences for the deportees. Delays in moving the expelled Cossacks exposed them to the fury of the surrounding population. The suppression of the uprising and the overt support of the Soviet state for mass expulsions allowed the indigenous communities to take revenge for decades of suffering, particularly when it became clear that Vrachev, far from trying to prevent the attacks, was encouraging them. The new commission sarcastically asked Vrachev who had given permission for the robberies to take place.⁵²

⁵⁰ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 2, l. 42.

⁵¹ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 15.

⁵² RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 16.

The spiral of violence set in motion by the deportations was now so great that Kosior in his capacity as commander of the *Kavtrudarmy* warned that the state was losing control of the Mountain Republic:

Hundreds of Chechens are attacking the evicted *stanitsas* everyday and if these *stanitsas* are not given to the Chechens as a matter of urgency a real war will flare up. I urgently request that you send trains.⁵³

Thousands of defenceless people waiting helplessly for transport with their property up for grabs mobilised the Chechen and Ingush, who saw it as opportunity for a final reckoning with their hated enemies. The suffering of the Cossacks was immaterial to the Soviet state, but the mass theft of state property and the collapse of Soviet authority were matters of the deepest concern.

The trains that did trickle through to the *stanitsas* were too few in number to move the thousands of people waiting to be deported, but this was of little concern to the organisers of the deportations. Vrachev's priority was to remove the Cossacks as fast as possible. He reported that 2,211 families were put on to 537 cattle trucks.⁵⁴

Other officials, however, were more forthcoming:

Dear Comrades, I am reporting for your information that the resettlement is a terrible and horrible nightmare. People are forced into wagons with lightening speed. They have sent wagons in such numbers that those being resettled have no possibility of taking even the barest minimum with them. This is a fact. For carrying 200 families only 25–30 wagons have been sent. Heaps of items have been abandoned to the mercy of fate...⁵⁵

The process of deportation was starting to take on parallels with the Armenian deportations of 1915 on the other side of the Caucasus mountain range: the disarming and removal of the adult male population; repeated attacks on those waiting for

⁵³ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 2, l. 12.

⁵⁴ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 2, l. 57.

⁵⁵ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 1, l. 18.

deportation or in the process of deportation by the surrounding population; clear encouragement of such attacks by officials. What was lacking and what was critical to stopping the attacks before they reached Armenian levels was the absence of an explicitly murderous intent on the part of the central government.⁵⁶ Officials from the centre repeatedly condemned the attacks on the Cossacks and the collusion of local officials, most notably in the enquiry set up by the government in January 1921 under the chairmanship of the veteran Bolshevik Nevksii to review situation in the Mountain Republic.

Deportations and the Soviet State

The deportations of October 1920 were an immediate response to an unforeseen act. The rebellion caught the Soviet authorities by surprise and the furious reaction of Ordzhonikidze was entirely genuine. The deportation order was explicitly punitive, serving to punish the rebellious *stanitsas*, as well as to give a warning to the rest of the Cossack population. Ordzhonikidze boasted to a party conference in Tiflis that, 'the expulsion of five *stanitsas* of the Sunzhenskoe line has had a stunning impact on the Cossacks.'⁵⁷ No other community had been punished in this manner as yet. Nevertheless, the policy was neither unpremeditated nor a spur of the moment decision by local officials: it was something the Soviet state had been working towards since the October Revolution.

It was no coincidence that the Cossacks were the first people to be subjected to such a policy. The regime had already experimented with extremely radical methods of dealing with the Cossacks earlier in the civil war. In January 1919 it issued

⁵⁶ For this critical factor see Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 98–9; Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 12–13.

⁵⁷ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 112.

instructions to local officials in the Don Cossack territory that amounted arguably to an order for genocide.⁵⁸ Among the measures supplementary to extermination contained in the order were policies that plainly envisaged mass expulsions and deportations. Point three of the circular decreed that it was necessary, 'to take all measures assisting the resettlement of newly arrived poor, organising this settlement where possible', and it ended with an instruction to the Ministry of Agriculture to work out quick practical measures for the mass resettlement of the poor on Cossack land, which was to be carried out through corresponding Soviet institutions.⁵⁹

Encouraged by the explicit instructions to implement the decree in the harshest possible manner, local officials expanded the points relating to deportation. The party organisation on the Don resolved, 'to take all measures for the expulsion of the Cossacks with the exception of Red Cossacks from a 50km strip on both sides of the railway and to colonise it with armed supporters of Soviet power.'⁶⁰ Point eleven of this resolution approved the 'resettlement of families of counter-revolutionary Cossacks and the confiscation of all property' while another point resolved that 'Cossacks over 45 who do not have sons in the Red Army and where there is information suggesting that they might support the counter-revolutionary movement are to be deported'.⁶¹

In the ebb and flow of the fighting on the Don in 1919, none of these deportations could be implemented. The absence of a single authoritative figure capable of imposing his will on the different Soviet agencies operating in the Don meant that the necessary coordination was lacking. Yet the drift towards mass deportation was clear, as were the widening categories of people liable for deportation.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of this see Peter Holquist, "'Conduct Merciless Mass Terror.'" Decossackization on the Don, 1919', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 38 (1997), pp. 127–62.

⁵⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 65, d. 35, l. 216.

⁶⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 65, d. 35, l. 215.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Central and local organisations interacted to radicalise further an already radical policy. Once this process of cumulative radicalism had started it was extremely difficult to stop.

Similar processes were at work in the Terek, but with the addition of intense pressure from the indigenous population to expel the Cossacks. When Soviet power was re-established in the Terek district in the spring of 1920, rumours swept the *stanitsas* that there was going to be a mass expulsion of Cossacks. Far from denying the rumours, Ordzhonikidze stated: ‘in order to regulate mutual relations between the Russian population and the indigenous one, it is necessary to remove intermingling by resettling all the *stanitsas* which are territorially attached to the indigenous population.’⁶²

This was no idle threat. In April 1920 three *stanitsas* numbering almost 9,000 people were expelled, deported, and the land given to the Ingush.⁶³ The little information that there is on the deportations suggests that it was the regional authorities rather than the *Kavbiuro* which took the lead in carrying them out, yet Ordzhonikidze had clearly signalled his approval for resettlement and did nothing to prevent it. These deportations set the pattern of robbery, violence, and murder that accompanied all subsequent ones. The commission of enquiry under Nevskii wrote of them:

For example from *st[anitsa]* Tarskaia 6 t[housand] were expelled. Land was given to them in Piatigorsk district. They had no possessions – everything had been robbed from them during the eviction. Piatigorsk is a barren place. There are no houses, children are dying

⁶² GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 249.

⁶³ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, ll. 104–6. (The exact number was 8,871.)

like flies not to speak of the fact that 57 men and 11 women were murdered by the Ingush.⁶⁴

The violence and chaos that accompanied the April deportations had no discernible impact on Soviet policy. In fact, it seemed to be taken as a sign that deportation was a feasible solution to the problems facing the Soviet regime in the former Cossack *voisko*. Authoritative voices began to call for a more far-reaching policy. In a major report on the situation in the North Caucasus in the summer of 1920, Mikoian added to the chorus of calls demanding the expropriation of the Cossacks in favour of the highlanders.⁶⁵ In early September, the *Kavbiuro* issued a decree initiating the expulsion of the Cossacks and the expropriation of their property, which was confirmed by a *Politbiuro* meeting on 17 September 1920:

Resolved: to confirm the decree of the *Kavbiuro* cc, concerning the allotment of land to the Chechens at the expense of the Cossack *stanitsas* and to recognise the necessity of introducing the most decisive measures for the free activity of the mountain peoples...⁶⁶

The *Politbiuro* signalled its determination to solve the problems of the Mountain Republic by the most radical means by deciding 'to send c. Stalin to the Caucasus to oversee the decisions in all their details of our policy in the Caucasus in general and towards the highlanders in particular.'⁶⁷ The same dynamic of cumulative radicalism that had been operating on the Don a year earlier appeared on the Terek. However, the Soviet state was now much more powerful and in the Caucasus, moreover, there were two men who possessed the power and the will to mobilise the disparate Soviet agencies to carry out the deportations. All that was lacking was a convenient pretext to begin operations.

⁶⁴ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 249.

⁶⁵ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 150, l. 173: 'Soviet power must carry out the old policy of a redistribution of land [in favour of] the landless and landed mountain peoples at the expense of the Cossacks.'

⁶⁶ RGASPI f. 17, op. 112, d. 93, l. 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

It was in this perilous atmosphere that the rebellion of the five *stanitsas* of the Sunzhenskaia line took place in September 1920. Ironically, the Nevskii commission looking into the revolt found that the main cause of it was the Cossacks' fear that they were about to be deported just like the three *stanitsas* in the spring.⁶⁸ In fact the five *stanitsas* were by no means the end. Stalin cabled Lenin on 26 October that 'several Cossack *stanitsas* had been punished in an exemplary manner' and that 'the question of the land and administrative arrangements of the highlanders and also of the Terek Cossacks will be resolved in the very near future.'⁶⁹ Three days later Ordzhonikidze's speech to party organisations in Vladikavkaz stated that a total of eighteen *stanitsas* were to be deported.⁷⁰ The following day Vrachev dropped a heavy hint to a delegation of Chechen and Ingush representatives that a much larger operation was going on than the removal of five rebellious *stanitsas*:

I do not know all the tasks which the central government had charged itself with in the future for satisfying the needs of the poorest, labouring people, but I think that the present measure is only a beginning and that in future a lot more will be done to improve the life of the labouring people.⁷¹

At the end of November Stalin sent another cable to Lenin informing him of the progress of the operation: 'First five *stanitsas* have been resettled in military fashion. The recent rebellion provided an appropriate cause and eased the eviction. The land is at the disposal of the Chechens. The position in the North Caucasus is undoubtedly more stable.'⁷² His next point suggests that the goal of removing eighteen *stanitsas* outlined by Ordzhonikidze a month earlier had now been superseded by an altogether more ambitious aim:

⁶⁸ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 248.

⁶⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 112, d. 93, l. 31.

⁷⁰ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 104.

⁷¹ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 1, l. 5.

⁷² RGASPI f. 17, op. 112, d. 93, l. 33.

Second: all the mass of materials gathered indicate that it is necessary to assign the Cossacks from the Terek Oblast to a separate *guberniia* since the cohabitation of the Cossacks and of the highlanders in one administrative unity is harmful and dangerous... There is no doubt that this change has decisively cleansed the atmosphere in the North Caucasus.⁷³

Stalin's words unconsciously echoed those of Loris-Melikov sixty years earlier. It seemed an opportune moment to settle the problems of the Terek Voisko once and for all. The only difference, of course, was that the victors and victims of tsarist times had been reversed.

Five more *stanitsas* were earmarked for eviction: Sleptsovskaiia, Assinovskaia, Nesterovskaia, Troitskaia, and Karabulakskaiia.⁷⁴ Several of these had been singled out for praise by Ordzhonikidze for their contribution to the Soviet side during the civil war.⁷⁵ On 31 November Stalin and Ordzhonikidze issued an order to begin the deportation of Assinovskaia:

You are ordered to carry out as a matter of urgency the resettlement of Assinovskaia beyond the River Terek.

Member of RVC of the Republic. Stalin. Member of the RVC of the *Kavfront*.

Ordzhonikidze.⁷⁶

Assinovskaia had taken no part in the September rebellion and therefore the deportation was not a reprisal, but the beginning of the much more ambitious plan to remove at least the eighteen *stanitsas* mentioned by Ordzhonikidze, and possibly all the Terek Cossacks from the Mountain Republic. The 'non-punitive' nature of this eviction was explained in a note attached to the deportation order by Kosior:

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 17.

⁷⁵ See for example the telegram sent to Lenin on 17 September 1918, in Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 2, l. 39.

‘Absolutely nothing of the property from those being resettled is to be confiscated or requisitioned apart from clear counter-revolutionaries.’⁷⁷

However, since there were no trains available to carry the Cossacks from Assinovskaia they lost nearly all their property regardless of the supposedly non-punitive nature of the deportation. It was also pointed out that moving thousands of people on foot in winter would have catastrophic results.⁷⁸ This was ignored.

Unlike the deportations from the Don in 1919, those of the Terek were carried out. A key reason for the difference is to be found in the commanding figure of Sergo Ordzhonikidze. He drove the policy of deportations from the time of his arrival in the North Caucasus in the spring of 1920. His personal determination and ruthlessness were matched by the formal powers at his disposal and the informal client–patron network of which he was the nodal point. Beneath him he had loyal and able operatives, beginning with Mikoian and Kirov and including Kosior, Kvirkeiia, and Vrachev, who occupied key positions in institutions representing the centre and local organisations.⁷⁹ In his speech to the Council of Ministers in July 1919, Ordzhonikidze emphasised the importance of personal connections if anything was to be done:

It was a very difficult time particularly for us comrades from the centre. On the one hand there was the so-called soviet power on the spot and on the other there were unfortunate assortments of every possible extraordinary commissars and plenipotentiaries, often simply swindlers and thieves, who incited provincial comrades against those arriving from the centre. I myself experienced a few bitter moments of distrust, but the old link with many comrades from the underground period and joint work saw me through. And

⁷⁷ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 204.

⁷⁸ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 200.

⁷⁹ Kvashokin, ‘Sovetizatsiia Zakavkaz’iia’, p. 165; Easter, *Reconstructing the State*, pp. 82–4.

for the whole of my time in the South with a single exception, I hardly met with any opposition from local comrades.⁸⁰

Ordzhonikidze's connections extended upwards. He could count on the unstinting support of Stalin and even Lenin until just before the latter's death.⁸¹ Moreover, Ordzhonikidze was the type of man to use his powers to the utmost. He frequently exceeded even the tremendous latitude that he was given, most notably when he engineered the invasion of Georgia in 1921 in spite of explicit orders to the contrary.⁸² Willing and able to take advantage of any opportunity, the revolt of the five *stanitsas* in September represented a perfect opening for Ordzhonikidze.

With the deportation of Assinovskaia, Soviet policy entered uncharted waters. Even as the operation unfolded it seemed as if the ambition of its architects, Ordzhonikidze and Stalin, was growing. The millenarian strain in Bolshevik ideology came more and more to the fore as the operation proceeded: the multi-layered and complex ethnic and land problems in the Terek Voisko were reduced to binary opposites of good and evil, lightness and dark. The desire to create a permanent and irreversible solution, regardless of the human cost, was a product of the same thinking. Such a solution allowed no exceptions based on individual attitudes or behaviour. Even those families with husbands and sons fighting in the Red Army were to be deported. Out of 2,211 deported families on which there is information, at least 898 were identified as supporters of Soviet power.⁸³ This was not something that the authorities became aware of only belatedly. As Ordzhonikidze knew well from his personal experience, many thousands of Cossacks were fighting loyally for Soviet armies. Just a few days before the revolt a 'week of action' had produced over 1,000

⁸⁰ Ordzhonikidze, *Izbrannye Stat'i i Rechi*, p. 60.

⁸¹ Khlebnikov, *In Stalin's Shadow*, pp. 14–15.

⁸² Kvashonkin, 'Sovetizatsiia Zakavkaz'ia', pp. 167–8.

⁸³ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 2. l. 57.

volunteers for the Soviet-Polish War from the Cossacks of the Sunzhenskoe line.⁸⁴ Such inconvenient facts, however, cluttered the stark simplicity of millenarian thinking and had to be discarded. Ordzhonikidze had declared all Cossacks traitors and Stalin's second telegram had announced that it was impossible for Cossacks and highlanders to live together. Presented in such terms the solution was simple: remove the Cossacks. Friends were rewarded, enemies punished, an historical wrong was righted, and stability and security were introduced into a strife torn area. Vrachev's commission implemented the policy ruthlessly. Expelling the wives, mothers, and children of men fighting in the Red Army did give rise to some qualms, but these were easily dealt with:

Difficulties are only encountered with the eviction of the women, children and families of Red Army and Soviet workers. Property is not to be confiscated from the families of Red Army and Soviet workers with the exception of surpluses on a common basis with all citizens. During the expulsions we must offer them the utmost help, giving them the possibility of resettling in neighbouring *stanitsas* or where they wish.⁸⁵

Little now appeared to stand in the way of deporting thousands more Terek Cossacks.

The ending of the deportations

On 21 January 1921 the central authorities abruptly halted the deportations: 'The Presidium of the CEC [Central Executive Committee] decrees the immediate suspension of the expulsion of the Cossacks from the Mountain Republic.'⁸⁶ The moratorium came too late for Assinovskaia, but it stopped the deportations of any further *stanitsas*. The CEC then set up a commission under the veteran Bolshevik Nevskii to carry out an urgent review of the situation in the Mountain Republic and

⁸⁴ Gugov, *Sovmestnaia Bor'ba Narodov*, pp. 483–4.

⁸⁵ RGVA f. 217, op. 5, d. 1, l. 1.

⁸⁶ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 37.

report back within two months. Included in Nevskii's mandate was a specific instruction to report on whether it was necessary 'to consolidate or expel the Cossacks/about what number of Cossacks it will be necessary to evict if it is recognised as unavoidable.'⁸⁷ This offers further evidence that something much broader than the eviction of five rebellious *stanitsas* was being planned.

Nevskii's report, delivered at the end of March to the CEC, was decisive in ending the policy of expulsions. He damned the theoretical underpinnings of the operation, the way it was carried out, and its consequences. Moreover, he argued that the deportations were unnecessary as there was more than enough land in the Mountain Republic for highlanders and Cossacks, and he demanded an immediate end to the expulsions.⁸⁸ Nevskii delivered a direct rebuke to Ordzhonikidze and an indirect one to Stalin for their theoretical conception of the problem. He reprinted Ordzhonikidze's original order deporting the five *stanitsas* and then commented:

These lines speak for themselves. However difficult were the circumstances in which Soviet power had to struggle, it is impossible to accept the thought that all Cossacks without exception are counter-revolutionaries.⁸⁹

Just in case the CEC might miss the point he underlined it.

As a Marxist, Nevskii rejected the theoretical basis of the deportations, but he was equally concerned about their disastrous consequences. On his way to the Mountain Republic Nevskii had passed through Rostov-na-Donu, where senior officials expressed their opposition to the policy of expulsions. Members of the food supply commission told him that the expulsions of the Cossacks were from their point of view 'a mistake'.⁹⁰ By the end of 1920, the food supply was absolutely

⁸⁷ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 37.

⁸⁸ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 254.

⁸⁹ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 248.

⁹⁰ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 234.

fundamental to the survival of the regime. With the end of the civil war in November of that year, getting sufficient food to the hungry cities of the north took priority over every other goal. Nevskii made much of this in his report. 'Who will feed the army and the workers?' was his tart rhetorical question.⁹¹ The local party organization in Grozny supported him, characterising the expulsion of the remaining *stanitsas* as 'inexpedient'.⁹²

The expulsions were flawed in another aspect which was of central importance to the regime throughout its existence: security. Stalin claimed that the expulsions had cleansed the atmosphere and created a much more stable situation in the republic, but this was a blatant lie, as Nevskii discovered even before he arrived in Grozny. Report after report emphasised the lawlessness that now engulfed the republic. One official in Rostov-na-Donu told him that, 'the only correct policy for the North Caucasus in general and the Mountain Republic in particular is the occupation of these regions by Soviet armies.'⁹³ Nevskii found that party and state organisations of the Mountain Republic were working hand-in-glove with numerous bandit elements:

The brazenness of the raids had reached such a degree that in Vladikavkaz a whole street was robbed and in Grozny they made off with horses from the *ispolkom*.

The second reason for these horrific manifestations is the protection which the bandits have from the authorities in the Mountain Republic.⁹⁴

As a result of the deportations, Soviet authority in the republic broke down completely. Local party organisations now operated virtually independent of Moscow, which was anathema to everything Bolshevism stood for.

⁹¹ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 251.

⁹² GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 189.

⁹³ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 233.

⁹⁴ GARF f. 1235, op. 95, d. 517, l. 252.

On 14 April 1921 a *Politbiuro* meeting discussed Nevskii's report and accepted his recommendations:

To receive com. Nevskii's report for information. Cossack *stanitsas* are not to be evicted. The land needs of the highlanders to be satisfied by means of consolidation of Cossack *stanitsas* through agreement between the Cossack *ispolkom* and the *ispolkoms* of the Ingush, Chechen and Ossetians...⁹⁵

The *Politbiuro* decision brought the support of the centre for any further deportations to an end. This did not immediately quell attacks on Cossack *stanitsas*, and the republican authorities continued to demand the expulsion of Cossacks in every forum open to them.⁹⁶ Without the support of the central authorities, however, the necessary will and apparatus were no longer available. By this time Ordzhonikidze and Stalin were both preoccupied with the ongoing invasion of Georgia – neither had much time to spare for the Mountain Republic. The conflict between the Cossacks and the highlanders reverted to traditional raiding and the rather less traditional imposition of punitive requisitioning quotas on the Cossack population.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The deportation of the Terek Cossacks in 1920 was a small affair compared to later deportations. Deporting 30,000 people would literally be all in a day's work for the NKVD in the 1930s and 40s.⁹⁸ Some aspects of the Terek deportations would find no echo in the later ones. The chaos, mobilisation of the surrounding population, and the loss of control by the central state were not repeated. Nevertheless the Terek deportations were a vital link in the chain connecting Soviet practices to those of the

⁹⁵ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 7.

⁹⁶ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 23.

⁹⁷ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 246, l. 21.

⁹⁸ The deportation of the Chechen people in 1944 was a case in point. N.L. Pabol' and P.M. Polian (eds), *Stalinskie Deportatsii 1928–1953* (Moscow, 2005), p. 455.

western colonial powers in general, and the tsarist regime in particular. The desire to settle an intractable problem once and for all by drastic methods preoccupied the Soviet leadership as much as it had the tsarist one. Issues of security and stability were central to both regimes, and both came to the conclusion that the wholesale removal of a 'disloyal' population would provide a permanent solution in the Caucasus. The fact that both attempts actually worsened the problems they had been designed to solve was of little concern to those implementing the policies.

In the Soviet case pragmatic decisions based on security issues were not the only operative ones. The millenarian strain that underlay their ideology made the Bolsheviks particularly inclined to seek total solutions to problems, rather than partial ones based on compromise or negotiation. The reduction of an historically complex situation in the Mountain Republic to a pantomime cast of good and evil was an essential part of this process. It required that the leadership, and especially Ordzhonikidze and Stalin, demonstrate an exceptional degree of cynicism and the ability to lie on an epic scale, secure in the knowledge that in the long run the end would justify any means.

By the end of the civil war, the Soviet leaders were already experienced practitioners of these arts. There were still sufficient checks within the system to call a halt to policies that were failing manifestly. Yet what augured particularly ill for the future was that much of the core of the Stalinist leadership of the late twenties and early thirties had already assembled and was working together to carry out the deportations. This core group had driven the schemes for a total solution, and had been thwarted only by checks from outside. By the end of the twenties all such checks had been removed.

Beneath the great issues of ideology and state policy were thousands of human victims, in this case Cossacks. They were the first of a long line of peoples to experience the unlimited violence of the Soviet state on the basis that they belonged to a particular group defined as hostile to that state. A year after the deportations, surviving Cossacks petitioned for permission to return to their homes:

Already soon it will be a year since we have suffered a terrible punishment for a crime of which only a very few are guilty. Our children are returning home from serving in the Red Army, but they will find neither their houses nor their families and those that do find them will see that their fathers, mothers and sisters are dying of hunger. It is too cruel for all of us to suffer punishment for the actions of a very few, and this only because we and they are called Cossacks.⁹⁹

The Cossacks had discovered that no service to the Soviet state was sufficient to override this stigma and exempt them from the loss of property, home, and – for many thousands – life. It was something that millions of others would discover shortly.

⁹⁹ RGASPI f. 64, op. 1, d. 247, l. 40.

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