

# AWAY WITH THE KULAKS!

Class Warfare & Dekulakization 1928-1934



Propaganda posters show how militant and direct the anti-kulak campaign was between 1929 and 1933.



"Kulak is our worst enemy. There is no place for him in the council... (1930).



We will smite the kulak who agitates for reducing cultivated acreage."



A worker holding a fat kulak by the scruff in front of a tribunal. The kulak's full bag is tied with strings to farms, villages, railroad, and factory. The worker is part of an angry army of the proletariat that wants the kulak tried as an oppressor. In reality, the kulaks were poorer than many of their persecutors.

In 1928, many had refused to join Soviet collective farms. The new collective farms were mismanaged and inefficient, and to many Ukrainian farmers, collectivization seemed like a return to serfdom. Moreover, the government insisted that farmers sell grain at a loss, which many refused to do. Between 1929-1930, many peasant protests broke out in Russia, half of them in Ukraine.

Joseph Stalin had to blame the peasants' resistance to collectivization on something other than the Communist Party itself, and he wanted Party members to take the place of peasant leaders. Stalin's answer was to create "class warfare," making "kulaks" the foremost public enemy. "Kulaks," or "tight-fisted ones," were peasants who owned the means of production and had become wealthy by exploiting others. Over time, the definition of a kulak expanded to include school teachers, pastors, mill owners, the mayor, community leaders, or anyone who opposed collectivization.

At first, kulaks were heavily taxed and fined, to burden them economically. In November, 1928, Stalin announced to the Central Committee that 5% of all peasant households were classified as kulaks, even after intense requisitioning had stripped the population of their food and wealth. Then, in 1929, Stalin excluded them from the collective farms. "They say [the priest and the kulak] are now the biggest thieves and robbers," wrote Mennonite Susan Toews in February, 1929. By the end of 1929, heads of families were arrested and shot in the Mennonite villages. Fines, dispossessions, and confiscations of property stripped many prosperous Mennonite families of their wealth.

By 1930, "kulak" families no longer looked like "wealthy capitalist exploiters." The average "kulak" from a North Caucasian village in 1930 averaged 1.4 horses, 1.8 cows, and 1.2 sheep per household, and the average "kulak's" income was lower than that of the average rural official who was persecuting him as a representative of a wealthy class. Nevertheless, the Party continued to cultivate hatred for these "vermin."

In 1930, 1.5 million Ukrainian farmers and their families were forcibly driven from their homes. Soldiers, secret police, or armed peasants confiscated land, livestock and other property, and took it for themselves, or transferred it to collective farms.

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Entire kulak families were packed onto freight trains sent to Siberia to work in the Gulag, the Soviet Union's vast system of labor camps. Some died of mistreatment, exposure, hunger, or disease in train stations and prisons before even reaching their destination. Those who arrived in the labor camps worked in mines or on large building projects, such as constructing the Trans-Siberian railroad or digging harbors. Siberia was vast, and had many camps where people slaved away for their crimes against the state. Moreover, children were raised in these settlements.

Ethnic Germans (Mennonites and non-Mennonites) in the Soviet Union fared worse than the average Russian during the early 1930s. Kulaks constituted only one percent of the Russian population in general, but Germans represented 14% of those arrested and deported. Ukrainian Mennonites were in the wealthiest strata of those Germans, and subsequently were arrested in a disproportionately high number.

Poor Mennonite peasants had a mixed reaction to dekulakization. Many saw the social injustice of persecuting their community leaders simply for their wealth and sided with "kulaks." Some, however, capitalized on the misfortunes of others, denouncing their neighbors out of greed. "If you wanted the state to dispose of your enemy in the village, you called him a kulak," historian Sheila Fitzpatrick wrote. The local Soviet officials followed an accusation with a swift arrest. "There were always informers...people who were willing to snitch on other people, so in the end you had to keep quiet," remarked Mennonite Anna Gunther. Mennonite Isaak Bergen's father went into hiding during this time. "We don't know who, but somebody had to give his name to the Soviets. It's better to leave it to the past," he said.

The broadening definition of "kulak" infused the rural population of the Soviet Union with fear. People were preoccupied with not being associated with the kulak class, and



Mass deportations of "kulaks" occurred beginning in 1930. These "kulaks" were disproportionately German, educated, and clergy.

many voluntarily gave away their possessions to escape notice by the state. One Russian peasant described the precarious position he was in: "I have to be cautious or the Soviet might say that I was making too much money, that I was a kulak...and I'd rather be dead than be branded as a kulak and run the risk of being banished with the family to some God-forsaken forest in the north. I won't give them a chance to call me a kulak. I'd never hire an outside person to work for me, even if all my

crops were to rot in the field...Do you suppose that I couldn't keep four cows? Of course I could. But I only have two, and in the fall I'll sell one. I am safer with one."

By 1934, 10 million kulaks had been deported to the far north, arrested, or shot. The Communist Party felt that opposition to collectivization had successfully been overcome, and decided to suspend class antagonism for the time being. However, the new collective farms were inefficient; food and electricity shortages were frequent because so many of those with farming and industrial expertise had been deported.



"Destroy the kulaks as a class!" (1930)

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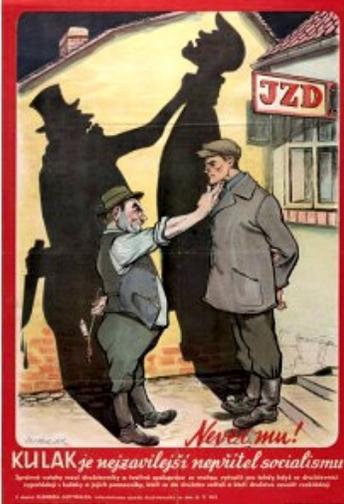
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*Mennonite Anna Peters' father was considered a kulak. Abraham Peters had owned crops and livestock during the 1920s. He and his wife had 11 children. Here is her story.*

**B**efore communism, my father was a very good farmer," said Anna. "That's why they took everything away...because he was, in their eyes, rich. We were forced to move out of our village, and my father was exiled to Siberia.

"In those years, children whose father was a kulak had absolutely no rights. They were not allowed to work in the collective. We were starving, so I left home at 12 to find work. Some people took me in, and milked their cow and did whatever they asked me to do.

"I had a brother who was older than me. Since he had left home before this happened, communist law said that he was not responsible for his father's actions.



The smaller kulak, dressed as a capitalist, is strangling a taller, fitter, younger peasant. The farm tool behind the kulak's back is, in the shadow, a dagger.

He worked as an engineer. But the younger ones [in my family], even my 8-year old brother, were all responsible for our father's actions because we lived with him until he was arrested.

"When I received my passport (at 16), I had to fill out a questionnaire about who my parents were, whether we had relatives overseas in America, and so on. I asked my brother, "Why be truthful? I'll lose my job, and I need to work!" He said, "If you don't say the truth, that won't do either." So I told the truth and just what I feared happened. They took my passport away and told me to leave the city. Kulaks were not to work. They were enemies of the people..."

*The Bergen family was torn apart when Mennonite Peter Bergen (left) was branded a kulak for hiding grain to feed his family. He went into hiding during the early 1930s. His family was ousted from their home by people who decided to capitalize on their neighbors' misfortune. Isaak Bergen (center), who was driven from his home at the age of ten, tells his story.*

**W**hen I was born my parents were very well off. Later on, we had nothing. I was the last one to leave our house. My brother and sister were in Neuendorf in school by then, and my father was in hiding. First one fellow moved in to one room, then a different fellow moved into another room. And then in October, 1933, they kicked me out. One of them, Henry Peters, wanted my room too, so the men told me that I had to go someplace else.

The only place I could think of to go was to my Uncle Henry's house. He lived across the street. He had been branded a kulak, too, and they had taken [his family's] rights away too. He couldn't work on the collective farm. Two other girls who were driven from their house, too, were also living with him. It was tight, but Uncle Henry



told me that I could sleep in a corner in the big room.

I went back with a little wagon to my house to get more of my possessions. The men asked me, "What do you want? You have enough already!"

I said, "My books, for school!"

They let me take those, but they said, "Don't take anything more." So I left everything there. They took everything in the whole house, and I had nothing."