COLLECTIVIZATION

How the Man of Steel Broke the People, 1928-1933

In 1928, as part of his First Five-Year Plan, Stalin launched a program of radical collectivization. Private property was abolished, and all industries became state property. Farmers who had developed their land for years had to give it, their farm machinery, and their livestock, except for one cow, to the government.

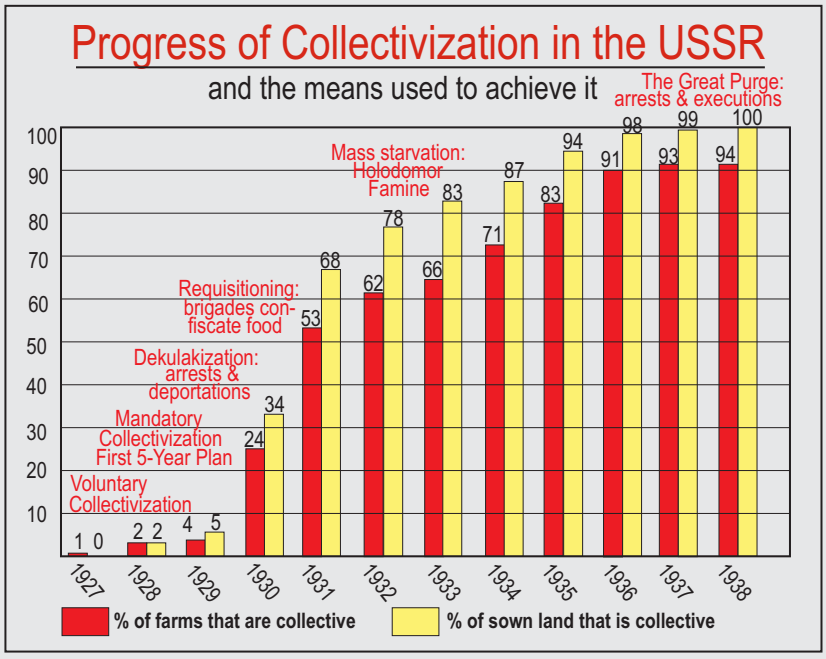
Soviet propaganda encouraged peasants to voluntarily collectivize, but the peasants didn't like giving up their private property. Government ineptitude and requisitioning caused hardship for everybody.

In Soviet ideology, collectivizing agriculture was the key to a strong Communist state. In theory, forming large state-run collective farms (kolkhozes) and mechanizing farming would increase agricultural productivity. Excess grain could be sold abroad, and the proceeds would fund Soviet industrialization and feed industrial workers.

The state formed collective farms by combining small farms together. Workers were to be paid by distributing farm earnings among them.

Collective farming was unpopular among farmers from the beginning. Mennonite farmers had been accustomed to near autonomy. Stripped of their land and resources, they began to work as common laborers, tilling and harvesting state-owned fields that once had been their own. The new kolkhoz leaders, threatened by the farmers' expertise, refused to use their practical knowledge and skill. "Poor fellows, who couldn't read or write, told us what to do when we worked in the fields," commented Isaak Bergen, whose father had been a successful farmer (and had been deemed a kulak). "It was so stupid." Bergen described how the overseers insisted on sowing when the ground was too muddy and wet. The seed was buried too deep and the harvest was poor as a result. "We tried to tell them, but they came from the government in Moscow. They did what they wanted," Bergen lamented. Moreover, the Soviet government began issuing internal passports, preventing peasants from moving to urban areas. To the people, it seemed like a return to serfdom, tying them to the land.

Gross inefficiency, the ineptitude of kolkhoz officials, and the poor maintenance of machinery caused lower crop yields. In May, 1930, Mennonite Susan Toews of Ohrloff, Molotschna, Ukraine, wrote, in a letter to Canadian relatives, "The collective has five binders standing on the yard waiting for repair, but there are no parts. What a shabby mess! One group is sitting with the bees, the teacher and the students are with the silk worms but know absolutely nothing about them." In another letter she reported, "Now the farmers cannot press their own



When the peasants resisted voluntary collectivization, Stalin used widespread arrests, deportations, and even famine to "encourage" the process.

From Endurance: One Family's Story of Surviving Communism, War, Famine, and the Soviet Gulag, by Anne-Marie Nakhla, c 2018.

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sunflower seeds. The collective will do it and then everyone will buy from the collective. We know what will happen: no one will get anything."

As government quotas were raised and agricultural output declined, workers were hardly paid anything at all. "Here the vehicles are hauling grain, watermelons, cabbage, tomatoes, and pumpkins, much of it to the station…Work and effort is of no avail since everything is taken away," Susan Toews wrote in June, 1930. "First there had to be 300 pud (10,833 lbs) of grain, now there are to be another 200 (7,222 lbs) [from the collective farm]. If not, another five [kulak] farms will be taken." Isaak Bergen transported goods by horse-drawn wagon. He said, "We had to work, but we didn't get any money for it...Over a year, we earned maybe a dollar for our work, and some wheat...two or three kilos (4-6 lbs). It varied from year to year."

A Soviet Collective Farm, called a Kolkhoz. Using tractors and machinery, the kolkhoz was supposed to yield much more than private farms had. In reality, there were grain shortages and the government sold the proceeds abroad. Kolkhoz workers received very little payment for their work, and began to starve.

Tractors belonged to Machine Tractor Stations, which were supposed to be "outposts of socialism in the countryside." Tractor drivers were paid with regularity. Mennonite Kornie Wiebe reported, "In the spring, we got a new machine, a diesel, and started to work 12 hours a day. They told us that for each hectare we plowed, we could use only so much petroleum. That was funny... We had heavy soil where we lived, not light, sandy soil. If we used more gas, then we had to pay the government back double, and fines on top of it as well. We got paid for the time that we plowed, put seed in, or cultivated, but not for the time needed to repair our machines. We got a paycheck once every month, which was very fortunate. We at least got something. If you worked in the kolkhoz and there wasn't anything left, you would get nothing."

People became increasingly hostile to collectivization. Dissension was rooted in instability about the future. Toews wrote, "There are daily meetings of the collective here. People are certainly not in love with each other. Each day people think it will collapse." The gov-ernment used increasingly coercive measures to ensure the progress of collectivization.

To meet government quotas, families were required to give the proceeds of their small gardens, or the few animals they still owned, to the state. Families cultivated gardens and kept a few chickens to ensure themselves some source of food, since their "fair share" from the kolkhoz was not forthcoming. Deprived of this means, a severe food shortage began in 1932 that caused large-scale disaster in the countryside, but ended resistance.

By 1934, 75% of the farms in the Soviet Union had been collectivized. Because many peasants resisted collectivization, the government used coercion and the threat of arrest to force them into compliance.

Come join us on the collective farm, comrade! (1931)

Isaak Bergen and Kornie Weibe were friends of Neta Loewen's in Abbotsford, B.C., also from Chortitza Colony. Susan Toews was a Mennonite from the Molotschna colony who wrote letters to her Canadian relatives during this period.

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ADVANCEMENTS IN AGRICULTURE

Under the First Five-Year Plan, 1928-1933

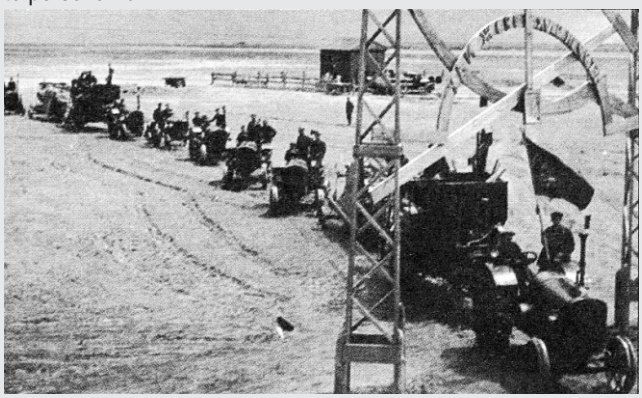
Russia lagged technologically behind other nations until Stalin pushed for industrialized agriculture. During his First Five-Year Plan (1929-1933), huge, state-owned collective farms and machinery replaced centuries-old methods of farming.

Isaak Loewen, Neta's husband, was part of the Neuendorf tractor brigade. Tractorists were a critical part of the push toward collectivized agriculture, and treated better than ordinary workers.

Tractorists received regular wages, but if they used more fuel than Moscow allowed, they had to pay for it out of their wages. They were also not paid for repairing their machinery.

Tractors and heavy machinery took the place of manual labor. In 1927, Stalin's advisers told him that modernizing the Soviet Union's farming would require 250,000 additional tractors. Factories worked hard to meet the demand, and farm workers received extra pay to operate their new machinery.

Tractorists tilling fields and paying homage to Stalin. Few Ukrainians benefitted from Stalin's policies, but criticizing him led to personal ruin.



Soviet tractors on display at a collective farm in Ukraine.