

What impact did collectivisation have on the peasants?

Source 1 - V. Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official, 1947*, p. 104. Kravchenko was a Communist who later fled the Soviet Union. Here he is an eyewitness to a round-up of kulaks:

'What's happening?' I asked the constable.

'Another round-up of kulaks,' he replied. 'Seems the dirty business will never end. The OGPU and District Committee came this morning.'

A large crowd was gathered outside the building... A number of women were weeping hysterically and calling the names of husbands and fathers. It was like a scene out of a nightmare... In the background, guarded by the OGPU soldiers with drawn revolvers, stood about twenty peasants, young and old, with bundles on their backs. A few were weeping. The others stood there sullen, resigned, hopeless. So this was 'Liquidation of the kulaks as a class!' A lot of simple peasants being torn from their native soil, stripped of their worldly goods and shipped to some distant labour camps. Their outcries filled the air... As I stood there, distressed, ashamed, helpless, I heard a woman shouting in an unearthly voice... The woman, her hair streaming, held a flaming sheaf of grain in her hands. Before anyone could reach her, she has tossed the burning sheaf into the thatched roof of the house, which burst into flames instantaneously.

'Infidels! Murderers!' the distraught woman was shrieking. 'We worked all our lives for our house. You won't have it. The flames will have it!' Her cries turned suddenly into bitter laughter. For some reason, on this occasion, most of the families were being left behind.



Source 3 - V. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901-1941*, translated and edited by P. Sedwick, 1967, p. 247

In a Kuban market town whose entire population was deported, the women undressed in their houses, thinking that no one would dare make them go out naked; they were driven out as they were to the cattle trucks, beaten with rifle butts... Trainloads of deported peasants left for the icy north, the forests, the steppes, the deserts. These were whole populations, denuded of everything; the old folk starved to death in mid-journey, newborn babies were buried on the banks of the roadside, and each wilderness had its crop of little crosses.

↑ **Source 2** - Peasants protesting against the kulaks. The Soviet version of the collectivisation process was that the poorer peasants themselves demanded that the kulaks be forced out and asked to be collectivised.



← **Source 4** - Peasants signing up to join a collective farm. Typically, party activists would call a village meeting and invite the villagers to set up and join a collective farm. They would offer inducements such as machinery, or make threats of increased taxes or forced exile.

→ **Source 5** - A famine victim, 1932

Source 6 - An OGPU colonel speaking to the historian I. Deutscher as they travelled to Kharkov, quoted in Stalin, rev. edn 1966, pp. 324-25

'I am an old Bolshevik,' he said almost sobbing, 'I worked in the underground against the Tsar and I fought in the civil war. Did I do all that in order that I should now surround villages with machine-guns and order my men to fire indiscriminately into crowds of peasants? Oh, no, no!'



Source 7 - M. Sholokhov, *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, 1935, pp. 71-73. Sholokov was an active Communist who wrote this pro-collectivisation novel. In this extract, one of the main activists of the local soviet, Razmiotnov, at a meeting with other activists where they are adding up the totals of grain they have confiscated from kulaks, is making a surprise announcement:

'I'm not going on.'

'What do you mean? "Not going on." Nagulnov pushed the abacus to one side... 'I've not been trained! I've not been trained to fight against children! At the front was another matter. There you could cut down who you liked with your sword or what you liked... And you can all go to the devil! I'm not going on!

...Do you call it right? What am I? An executioner? Or is my heart made of stone? I had enough at the war... Gayev's [a kulak] got eleven children. How they howled when we arrived! You'd have clutched your head. It made my hair stand on end. We began to drive them out of the kitchen... I screwed up my eyes, stopped my ears and ran into the yard. The women were all in a dead fright... the children... Oh, by God, you...'

...'Snake!' [Nagulnov] gasped out in a penetrating whisper, clenching his fist. 'how are you serving the revolution? Having pity on them? Yes... You could line up thousands of old men, women and children, and tell me they'd got to be crushed into the dust for the sake of the revolution, and I'd shoot them all down with a machine gun.' Suddenly he screamed savagely, a frenzy glittered in his great, dilated pupils, and the foam seethed at the corners of his lips.

Source 8 - V. Kravchenko, *I chose Freedom; The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official*, 1947, p. 130. Kravchenko, a party activist in the Ukraine, quotes the secretary of the Ukrainian Central Committee

A ruthless struggle is going on between the peasantry and our regime. It's a struggle to the death. This year was a test of our strength and their endurance. It took a famine to show them who is master here. It has cost millions of lives, but the collective farm system is here to stay. We've won the war.

Source 9 - L. Kopelev, an activist who later went into exile, quoted in R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 1986, p. 233

With the rest of my generation, I firmly believed that the ends justified the means. Our great goal was the universal triumph of Communism...

I saw what 'total collectivisation' meant – how they mercilessly stripped the peasants in the winter of 1932-33. I took part in it myself, scouring the countryside... testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to buried grain. With the others, I emptied out the old folks' storage chests, stopping my ears to the children's crying and the woman's wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the great and necessary transformation of the countryside; that in the days to come the people who lived there would be better off...

In the terrible spring of 1933 I saw people dying of hunger. I saw women and children with distended bellies, turning blue, still breathing but with vacant lifeless eyes. And corpses – corpses in ragged sheepskin coats and cheap felt boots; corpses in the peasant huts... I saw all this and did not go out of my mind or commit suicide... Nor did I lose my faith. As before, I believed because I wanted to believe.