

**ISCKMC 2022**  
**International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»**

**DECOSSACKIZATION: CAUSES, NATURE AND  
CONSEQUENCES**

Valery Dudarovich Dzidzoev (a)\*, Zulay Imranovna Khasbulatova (b),  
Khatmat Abuevna Matagova (c)

\*Corresponding author

- (a) Gorsky State Agrarian University, 37, Kirov str., Vladikavkaz, Russia, dzidzoev@mail.ru  
(b) Chechen State Pedagogical University, 33, S. Kishiyev str., Grozny, Russia, khasbulatova40@mail.ru  
(c) Chechen state University named after A.A. Kadyrov, 32, Sheripov str., Grozny, 364021, Russia, hatmat73@mail.ru

**Abstract**

During the Civil War, in January 1919, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks adopted a directive on decossackization. This document determined the policy of the Soviet government towards the Cossacks. The document emphasized the need to apply "merciless mass terror" to the "kulak tops" of the Cossack communities and all Cossacks who took part in the struggle against Soviet power. Extreme cruelty of the party was due to the fact that the vast majority of the Cossacks, including middle peasants, opposed the Bolsheviks. At the same time, there were those in the Bolshevik party who were convinced of the need to cooperate with the Cossacks. Some of these leaders united around Lenin. Realizing the futility of a merciless struggle with the Cossacks, the RCP (b) was forced to abandon the directive. In the second half of 1919, the Bolsheviks began to change their tactics in relation to the Cossacks. The theses on the work on the Don published on September 30, 1919 emphasized the need for a clear distinction between the Cossack leaders and the labor Cossacks. The Bolsheviks realizing the futility and too cruel measures against the Cossacks began to soften penalties and headed for a new relationship between the party and the Cossacks. A more peaceful stage of the complex relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Cossacks began.

2357-1330 © 2022 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Bolsheviks, Cossacks, Civil war, decossackization, genocide

## 1. Introduction

Regarding the tragedy of the Cossacks, it is necessary to remember the lines of the infamous "Sverdlov's circular" adopted in early 1919. In a letter to the Central Committee of the RCP (b) "On the attitude towards the Cossacks" ("Sverdlov's directive") Sverdlov emphasized the need to apply "merciless mass terror" not only to the "kulak elites" of the Cossack communities, but also to all Cossacks who took part in the fight against Soviet power "(Letter by Sverdlov ..., 1989). During the Civil War, Sverdlov's words were perceived by all fighters for Soviet power as a tough directive to practical actions and meant the practical embodiment of huge and severe repressions against the Cossacks. The extreme cruelty of the leaders of the RCP (b) was explained by the fact that the absolute majority of the Cossacks, including many middle peasants, opposed the Bolsheviks. It was a united front against the young Soviet. The well-known experts in the history of the Cossacks Skorik and Tikidzhyan (2010) claim: "The cruelty of the leadership of the RCP (b) towards the Cossacks was due to the fact that differences in the social status and financial situation did not prevent the Cossacks from speaking out against the Bolsheviks" (p. 98). It is necessary to pay attention to several fundamental positions in the policy and tactics of the Bolsheviks in relation to the Cossacks. Firstly, the "Sverdlov's directive" does not say anything about an alliance of the Cossacks with the Soviet government. This formulation must be recognized as a serious mistake, because among the Cossacks there were also the poorest who continued to hesitate, on whose side to stand - red or white. Despite the hostility of the Cossacks to the Soviet authorities, Sverdlov's recommendations were indiscriminate in relation to them, and extremely harmful to the socio-political situation. Secondly, among the Bolsheviks there were many who shared Sverdlov's position towards the Cossacks. Many of them adhered to these anti-Cossack convictions. At the same time, there were those who were sincerely convinced of the need to develop good relations with the Cossacks; they united around Lenin.

## 2. Problem Statement

The history of the Cossacks seems to be a highly topical scientific and socio-political issue. Their privileges at different historical stages were studied by many Russian experts (Gordeev, 1991). Much research was devoted to the issue of decossackization, which in the post-Soviet period received another name – the genocide of the Cossacks (Chernopitsky, 1996). Until now, the topical problems of the history of the Cossacks such as the number of Red Cossacks who participated in the establishment of Soviet power remain unexplained. The well-known "Sverdlov's circular" and its tragic consequences, the "hidden" decossackization during the NEP years, the general line of the Communist Party regarding the Cossacks from the first years of Soviet power (Russian Cossacks, 1999) and other problems require objective studies.

## 3. Research Questions

The subject of the research is the relationship between the Soviet government and the Cossacks.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose is to study the policy and tactics of the Bolsheviks in relation to the Cossacks.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological basis was the principles of objectivity, scientificity and historicism, involving the study of facts and phenomena in all their diversity, in specific historical conditions, in order to highlight both the positive and negative sides of the historical events.

#### **6. Findings**

Realizing the exceptional hostility and futility of a merciless struggle with the Cossacks, the RCP (b) was forced to abandon Sverdlov's directive. Two serious circumstances contributed to that. Firstly, anti-Soviet uprisings broke out in a number of Cossack territories, and it took a lot of time and effort to suppress them. They took place not only on the Don, but also on the Terek and in the Kuban region. Secondly, the supporters of Lenin tried to find opportunities for a peaceful dialogue with the poorest Cossacks. In other words, it was necessary to review the policy of the RCP (b) in relation to the middle and poorest strata of the Cossacks. In this regard, Lenin called the Cossacks allies of the hegemonic class (Lenin, 1974). The Bolsheviks began to change their policy and tactics in relation to the Cossacks. The "Theses on work on the Don" published in "Izvestia of the Central Committee of the RCP (b)" on September 30, 1919 emphasized the need for "a clear distinction between the Cossack upper classes and the labor Cossacks". The document said that the Soviet authorities did not strive for forcible decossackization. In addition, the Cossacks were convinced that the Soviet authorities did not encroach on the peculiar Cossack life, they promised all loyal Cossacks their protection (Barchugov, 1973). The "Theses on Work on the Don" said that all opponents of the Soviet regime would be mercilessly destroyed (Barchugov, 1973). An analysis of the socio-political situation of that period convinces us that the leadership of the Bolshevik party provided the Cossacks with the opportunity for peaceful coexistence with the Soviet system. Much depended on the Cossacks themselves. Since then, the Bolshevik Party embarked on a new relationship with the Cossacks. This was far from decossackization, which began at the beginning of 1919. Some researchers consider decossackization to be terror against the Cossacks (Perekhov, 1995). In reality, there were many elements of terror in relation to the top leadership of the Bolshevik Party towards the Cossacks, especially during the winter period of 1919. However, already since the publication of the Theses, a more peaceful stage in the complex relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Cossacks began. The Bolshevik Party pursued its own practical goals. The Party sought to weaken the position of the Cossacks and tried to appease the Cossacks, promising them the preservation of many of the rights of Soviet citizens. At the congress of the peoples of the Terek region on November 17, 1920 in Vladikavkaz, Stalin said: "The first question is the attitude towards the Cossacks. Life has shown that the cohabitation of the Cossacks and mountaineers within a single administrative unit led to endless unrest. In order to avoid mutual insults and bloodshed, it is necessary to separate the Cossacks from the highlanders, it is beneficial for both sides. The People's Commissar for

Nationalities spoke about numerous military skirmishes between the Cossacks and the mountain peoples (Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, etc.), when they decided on the eviction of the Cossacks with their families from the territory of the future Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Stalin emphasized that the Soviet government decided to “allocate the majority of the Cossacks to a special province, and most of the highlanders to the autonomous Mountainous Soviet Republic so that the Terek River served as the border between them.” He said that the Soviet government sought to protect the interests of the Cossacks and did not try to take away their lands. The new government wanted to “liberate the Cossacks from the yoke of the tsarist generals and the rich.”

Turning to the characteristics of the anti-Soviet actions of the Cossacks, Stalin said: “The Cossacks behaved more than suspiciously. They did not trust the Soviet government. Either they got mixed up with Bicherakhov (the Mozdok Ossetian is a Cossack, the brother of General Lazar Bicherakhov Georgy Bicherakhov was the organizer and inspirer of the anti-Soviet demonstrations in Vladikavkaz in August 1918 known in history as the “August events”), then they hobnobbed with Denikin, with Wrangel. Recently, when there was no peace with Poland, and Wrangel was advancing on the Donets Basin, one part of the Terek Cossacks rebelled against our troops in the rear. I'm talking about the recent uprising of the Sunzha line which was intended to cut off Baku from Moscow”.

This attempt was temporarily successful for the Cossacks. With his inherent integrity and frankness, Stalin continued to criticize the perfidious actions of the Terek Cossacks but appreciated the active support of the mountain peoples (Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, and other indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus), calling them "worthy citizens of Russia." On behalf of the Soviet government, he promised the Cossacks safe life without any harassment, emphasizing that this "depends on their own behavior." Stalin acknowledged the repressive nature of the punishment of the Cossacks, emphasizing that:

if the Cossacks do not give up their perfidious antics against Russia, the government will have to resort to repression. But if the Cossacks continue to behave like honest citizens of Russia, not a single hair will fall from the head of a Cossack (Stalin, 1947, p. 205).

Other leaders of the Soviet state (Trotsky, Kalinin, Smilga) also showed good intentions towards the peaceful Cossacks. Kalinin repeatedly emphasized the good intention of the government towards all citizens of the country, regardless of their nationality, religion, place of residence, etc. The only condition that was put before these citizens was to forget about resistance to the Soviet regime. Trotsky promised calm life to the Cossacks. He emphasized that “the Soviet government opens wide gates to the Cossacks and said: “no matter how you behaved in the past, but if you realize that you are brothers of workers and peasants, welcome, Cossacks!” (Trotsky, 1920, p. 324). Smilga wrote that “the Cossacks are paying bloody money for their police past, for their ignorance, for their faith in officers, for their split from the working people of Russia” (Smilga, 1920, p. 103). At the same time, he apologized for the repressions and extremely harsh measures against the Cossacks: “it is also indisputable that the Soviet workers did not understand the situation and made many mistakes” (Smilga, 1920, p. 104).

Not always the leaders of the Soviets were at their best (Smilga, 1920). On the one hand, they reassured the Cossacks, promising them peaceful life, and on the other, they assured them of the need to become an integral part of the multinational Soviet people and begin active Soviet construction. The leadership of the RSFSR made great efforts to stop the anti-Soviet actions of the Cossacks and involve them in peaceful Soviet construction. In solving this problem, the Cossack department of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee played an important role, developed plans and held mass political events with the sole purpose of changing public consciousness and opinion about the Cossacks as a force hostile to Soviet power. To this end, the employees of the Cossack department tried to create a Soviet image of a Cossack – a worker, little different from any other peasant. Among the initiatives of the Cossack department, two solutions could be mentioned. First, they initiated the creation of the First All-Russian Congress of Labor Cossacks in 1920. The Cossack department saw it as a way to demonstrate the pro-Soviet sentiments of the middle peasants and the poor. At the initiative of the congress organizers, relations with the new Bolshevik state system improved. Secondly, in February 1921, the Cossack department supported the proposal to create the "Northern Cossack Commune" near Petrograd. It was decided to create the commune near Petrograd, where peaceful Cossacks would work hard together with Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and representatives of other Russian peoples who accepted the conceptual ideas of Soviet construction.

In addition to other issues of Soviet construction, the concept of this commune also pursued the task of showing the Cossacks' concern for the development of agriculture. The Soviet government wanted to show that the Cossacks could master the secrets of agriculture, cattle breeding, beekeeping, fishing, etc. To create the "Northern Cossack Commune" it was necessary to establish strong working ties with the working class and the authorities of Petrograd (GARF. F. 1235. Op. 84. D. 6. L. 9). At a meeting of the Cossack department, Cossack Korobov made a report on a "special scientific commission" consisting of specialists "who would deal with the history and culture of the Cossacks from a revolutionary point of view." According to the Cossack department, the history and culture of the Cossacks developed "among working people" and the Cossacks do not differ from the working Russian peoples. The Cossack department decided "to create a scientific historical Commission at the Main Directorate in Petrograd..." (SARF F. 1235. Inventory 84. D. 6. L. 10-10 Ob). The Cossack department made incredible efforts in order to present the Cossacks as an ordinary law-abiding people, whose history and culture were distorted by the authorities.

## **7. Conclusion**

By early 1920, the Bolshevik Party learned bitter and necessary lessons from the complex process of decossackization. This painful process was a terror against the Cossacks, a significant part of which took up arms against the Soviet government at the height of the Civil War of 1919. The Bolsheviks offered the Cossacks cooperation and alliance in building the Soviet multinational state. The majority of the Cossacks accepted the conditions of the Bolsheviks, although the consequences of decossackization made themselves felt for a long time.

## References

- Barchugov, P. V. (Ed.). (1973). *Essays on the history of the party organizations of the Don*. Part I. Rostov publishing house.
- Chernopitsky, P. G. (1996). *Soviet power and the Cossacks // Problems of the Cossack revival (collection of scientific articles)*. Part 2. RSU Publishing House.
- Gordeev, A. A. (1991). *History of the Cossacks. Part I The Golden Horde and the birth of the Cossacks*. Strastnoy boulevard.
- Lenin, V. I. (1974). Report on the work in the countryside at the VIII RKP (b). March 23, 1919. In: *Full composition of writings*, Vol. 38. Politizdat.
- Perekhov, Ya. A. (1995). Cossacks and power: the search for consensus. *Collection of scientific articles for the V All-Russian (International) scientific conference. Revival of the Cossacks, history and modernity* (Ed. 2, corrected and supplemented). Novocherkassk.
- Russian Cossacks. Historical and legal aspect: documents, facts, comments 1917–1940*. (1999). Nalchik.
- Skorik, A. A., & Tikidzhyan, R. G. (2010). *Donets in 1920: essays on history* (executive editor V.A. Bondarev). Rostov-on-Don.
- Smilga, I. A. (1920). Peace to the labor Cossacks! *Voice of the labor Cossacks, February 1, 1920*.
- Stalin, I. V. (1947). *Op. T.4*. OGIZ; State publishing house of political literature.
- Trotsky, L. D. (1920). Cossacks, line up in the Soviet column! Regarding the upcoming Cossack Congress. *Voice of the Labor Cossacks*.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341137704\\_Obektivnyj\\_analiz\\_krajnostej\\_v\\_istoriceskih\\_issledovaniyah\\_o\\_privilegiah\\_kazacstva\\_i\\_popytkah\\_otdelnyh\\_istorikov\\_ignorirovat\\_ih](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341137704_Obektivnyj_analiz_krajnostej_v_istoriceskih_issledovaniyah_o_privilegiah_kazacstva_i_popytkah_otdelnyh_istorikov_ignorirovat_ih)