11

Was collectivisation a success?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW Stalin forced through collectivisation at an incredibly rapid pace. This caused chaos in agriculture as well as suffering and misery on a huge scale. At the end of the first wave of collectivisation, he appeared to relent and called a halt. But the next year he restarted the programme with increased vigour. Peasant attempts to resist the process proved futile. By 1932, collectivisation had resulted in an enormous drop in agricultural production and created a famine in which millions died. However, Stalin secured the surplus food he needed to feed the industrial workforce and, to some extent, to pay for industrialisation.

A Why collectivise? (pp. 158–161)

B Why was collectivisation carried out so rapidly? (p. 162)

C How was collectivisation carried out? (pp. 163–164)

D What impact did collectivisation have on the peasants? (pp. 164–170)

E Was collectivisation a success? (pp. 171–172)

A Why collectivise?

In mid-1929, less than five per cent of peasants were on collective or state farms. In January 1930, Stalin announced that around 25 per cent of the grain-producing areas were to be collectivised by the end of the year. This announcement took even his own officials by surprise. Most party members had assumed that collectivisation would be carried out on a voluntary basis and had not anticipated the speed at which it was going to take place. Some were horrified.

SOURCE 11.1 A mechanised harvester at work. The government promised that collective farms would bring modern agricultural machinery and methods to the peasants

SOURCE 11.2 Babies are settled into an outdoor nursery as their mothers march off to work in the fields of the collective farm

SOURCE 11.3 A literacy class on a collective farm

SOURCE 11.4 The slogan on this poster reads 'Come and join our kolkhoz, comrade!'

ACTIVITY

Examine Sources 11.1–11.4. They are examples of propaganda published to persuade peasants of the advantages of collectivisation. What messages do they contain about why the Communists thought collectivisation was a good thing?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes explaining:

a) why the Communists saw collectivisation as the solution to the problems facing Soviet agriculture

b) how a KOLKHOZ worked and its relationship with the towns and with machine and tractor stations (MTS).

KOLKHOZ
Collective farm.

What was a collective farm?

There were three main types of collective farm:

- the toz, where peasants owned their own land but shared machinery and co-operated in activities like sowing and harvesting. This type was more common before 1930
- the sovkhoz, which was owned and run by the state. The peasants who worked on this state farm were paid a regular wage, very much like factory workers
- the kolkhoz, where all the land was held in common and run by an elected committee. To form a kolkhoz, between 50 and 100 households were put together. All land, tools and livestock had to be pooled. Under the direction of the committee, the peasants farmed the land as one unit. However, each household was allowed to keep its own private plot of up to one acre. They could use this to grow vegetables and keep a cow, a pig and fowl.

The original aim of collectivisation was to create more sovkhozes, but the kolkhoz with private plots became the type most favoured by the Communists in the collectivisation process of the 1930s.

Why did the Communists think collectivisation was the solution to the USSR's agricultural problems?

1 Larger units of land could be farmed more efficiently through the use of mechanisation. Tractors and other machinery would be supplied by the state through huge machine and tractor stations (MTS). Experts could help peasants to farm in more modern ways using metal ploughs and fertilisers. The net result would be much higher food production.
2 Mechanised agriculture would require fewer peasants to work the land. This would release labour for the new industries.
3 It would be much easier for the state to procure the grain it needed for the cities and for export. There would be fewer collection points and each farm would have Communist supporters who would know how much had been produced.
4 Collectivisation was the socialist solution for agriculture. You could not build a socialist state when the majority of the population were private landholders who sold their products on the market. Collectivisation would socialise the peasantry. They would live in 'socialist agrotowns': living in apartment blocks instead of wooden huts, leaving their children in crèches, eating in restaurants, and visiting libraries and gymnasiums. They would be bussed out to the fields to work. They would learn to work together co-operatively and to live communally.

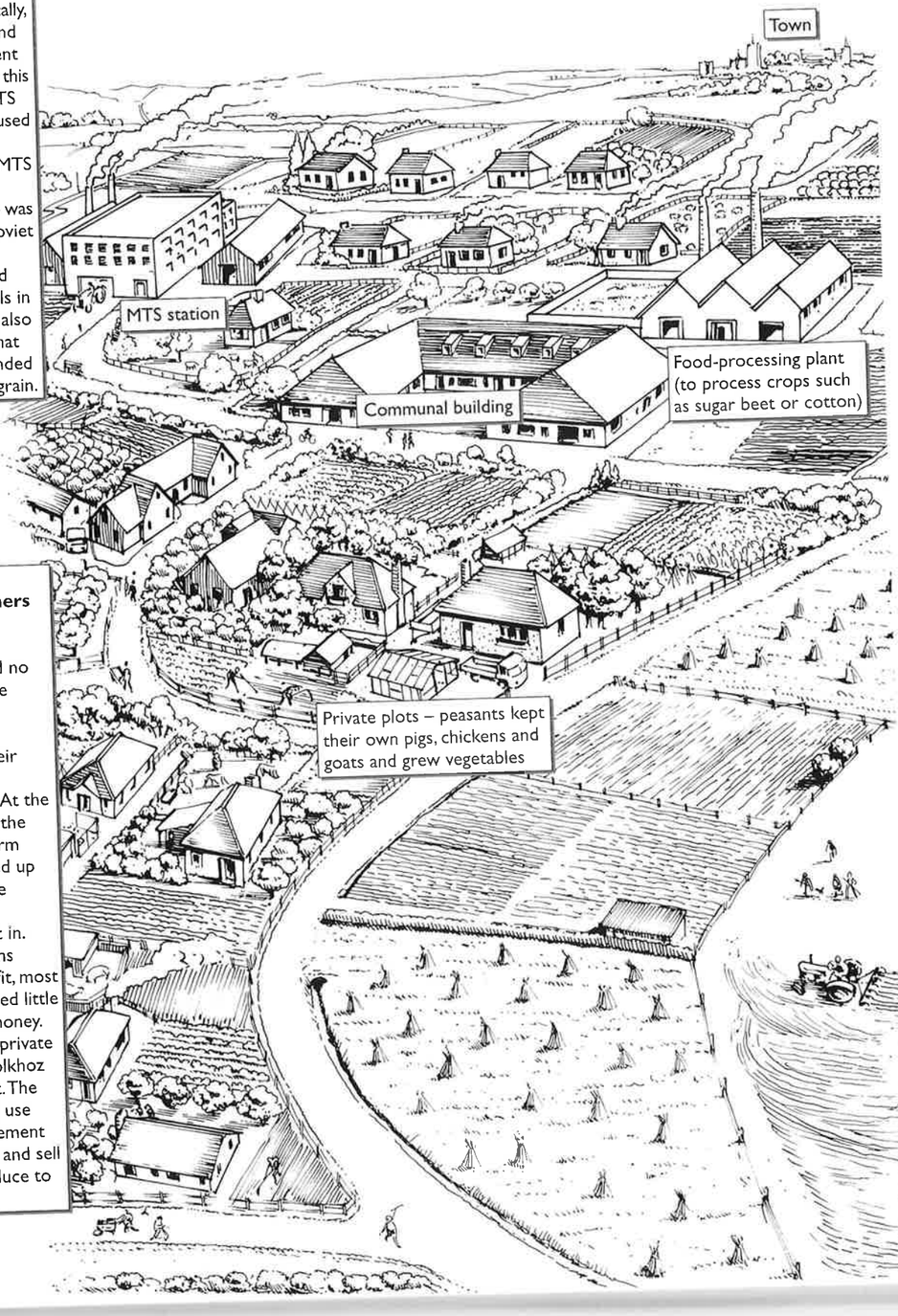
B Why was collectivisation carried out so rapidly?

The answer to this question lies in the grain procurement crisis of 1928–29. We saw on page 154 that Stalin had visited the Urals and sent officials into the countryside to seize grain after the poor harvest in 1928. In 1929, even though the harvest was much better, the state was still finding it difficult to get grain out of the peasants. The peasants were resisting the government's policies and were not marketing their food. Matters were so bad that meat as well as bread had to be rationed in the cities. The cities were hungry. Stalin blamed kulaks (rich peasants) for hoarding grain (see Source 11.5). Large numbers were arrested and deported to Siberia.

■ 11A A plan of a collective farm

MTS stations
There were 2500 machine and tractor stations (MTS). Established to support collective farms, they maintained and hired out machinery. Typically, peasants had to hand over twenty per cent of their produce for this service. But the MTS stations were also used to control the countryside. Each MTS had a political department. Its job was to root out anti-soviet elements and troublemakers, and establish party cells in local areas. It was also there to ensure that every kolkhoz handed over its quota of grain.

Relationship of the collective farm to the towns
The first priority of the collective farm was to deliver quotas of grain and other food products to the state. The state paid very low prices, then sold the produce to the towns at slightly higher prices. Once the state quota had been met, peasants could sell any surplus at the local market. This came mostly from the peasants' private plots and was the main source of milk, butter, eggs, etc., for the urban population.



How were collective farmers paid?
Workers on the kolkhoz received no wages. They were credited with 'workdays' in exchange for their labour on the collective fields. At the end of the year, the profits of the farm would be divided up according to the workdays each peasant had put in. Since most farms made little profit, most peasants received little in the way of money. This made the private plots on the kolkhoz very important. The peasants could use these to supplement their own diet and sell any extra produce to the towns.

FOCUS ROUTE

1 How can you explain why Stalin decided to collectivise so rapidly?
2 Why was his policy so actively resisted by Bukharin and the right wing of the party?
3 What other pressures was Stalin under at the time when the decision to collectivise rapidly was taken?
4 Why is it difficult to explain the reasons for Stalin's decision?

SOURCE 11.5 J. V. Stalin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11, 1955. Visiting Siberia in January 1928, Stalin is reported to have said the following to administrators

You have had a bumper harvest . . . Your grain surpluses this year are bigger than ever before. Yet the plan for grain procurement is not being fulfilled. Why? . . . Look at the kulak farms: their barns and sheds are crammed with grain . . . You say that the kulaks are unwilling to deliver grain, that they are waiting for prices to rise, and prefer to engage in unbridled speculation. That is true. But the kulaks . . . are demanding an increase in prices to three times those fixed by the government . . .

But there is no guarantee that the kulaks will not again sabotage the grain procurements next year. More, it may be said with certainty that so long as there are kulaks, so long will there be sabotage of grain procurements.

Bukharin and the right wing of the party were worried that Stalin's methods would lead to the return of War Communism – a cycle of violence and rural unrest, shortages of bread and other foods, and rationing. Under pressure from the right, Stalin agreed to stop grain seizures in 1928 and to try raising the price of grain to encourage peasants to put more on the market. But with continuing food shortages in 1929, the party swung behind Stalin, and Bukharin and the rightists were removed from key posts. Shortly afterwards, Stalin announced a policy of forced mass collectivisation. He had decided to break the peasants' stranglehold on the economy.

It seems likely therefore that the decision to collectivise rapidly was an emergency decision taken to solve the procurement crisis of 1928–29 and to crack down on the resistance of the peasants. This conclusion is supported by the lack of preparation and planning for a revolution in Soviet agriculture. There were simply not enough tractors, combine harvesters, agricultural experts or supplies of fertiliser to carry out a high-speed collectivisation programme.

However, this decision should be seen in the context of the other factors mentioned at the end of Chapter 10. Stalin, the party and many others wanted to move forward. There was a genuine sense of crisis in urban Russia at the end of the 1920s. The 1927 war scare had made the perceived need for industrialisation all the more urgent and that meant getting more grain out of the peasants. The party broadly supported Stalin and wanted to force the pace of industrialisation and solve the peasant problem.

Historians have also shown that there was a lot of support for collectivisation among the urban working class. It was not only that they were hungry and angry at what they saw as the deliberate actions of peasants in holding back food. Many saw the socialisation of the land as a key part of the revolution and the way out of poverty towards the great society. Whether they, or indeed Stalin, had any idea of what this would entail is a different matter.

■ **Learning trouble spot**

Complicated explanations

It is sometimes difficult to explain the actions of politicians because they have to cope with a range of interrelated issues at any given time and under different political and economic pressures. When Stalin was deciding whether or not to opt for rapid forced collectivisation, he was also:

- trying to push forward rapid industrialisation plans upon which his credibility as a leader was staked
- dealing with the problem of feeding the workers, his natural supporters
- engaged in a power struggle to become leader of the party
- fighting a political battle with Bukharin and the right about the pace of industrialisation and how they should handle the peasants
- looking at the results of the Urals–Siberian method in 1929, which appeared to have been a successful way of getting grain from the peasants
- thinking about a long-term solution to allow the development of agriculture, which for Communists had always been collectivisation and agrotowns.

So when Stalin made his decision, he was playing with a range of factors. And it might also be the case that he decided he had had enough of the peasants and was going to break their resistance. His personality also has a role to play here and he had a history of taking revenge on people who thwarted him.

C How was collectivisation carried out?

FOCUS ROUTE

1 Explain the process by which collectivisation was carried out.
2 Describe how the peasants resisted this process.

WHO WERE THE KULAKS?

Soviet writers divided the peasants into three classes:

- **kulaks, or better-off peasants**
- **middle peasants (those on moderate incomes)**
- **poor peasants and landless labourers.**

An examination of Soviet data shows that the so-called kulak might own one or two horses, hire labour at times during the year and produce a small surplus for the market. There was no separate rich peasant stratum. Indeed, once the attack on kulaks began, many got rid of some of their animals and other resources so that they would be classed as middle peasants.

In practice, a kulak was anyone officials decided was one. Often the people they identified were the most enterprising peasants in a village, the better farmers, the ones who had a little machinery and a few animals. So, in getting rid of them, they were destroying the best chance for more successful agriculture.

Force, terror and propaganda were the main methods employed in carrying through collectivisation. Stalin returned to the familiar ideological weapon of the 'class enemy' as the mechanism to achieve his ends. It was not difficult to find a class enemy in the countryside – the kulak! In December 1929, he announced the 'liquidation of the kulaks as a class'. Molotov, one of Stalin's leading supporters, said that they would hit the kulaks so hard that the so-called 'middle peasants' would 'snap to attention before us'.

The aim of identifying the kulak as a class enemy was to frighten the middle and poor peasants into joining the kolkhozes. But villagers were often unwilling to identify kulaks, many of whom were relatives or friends, people who might have helped them out in difficult times or lent them animals to plough their land. Even if the kulaks were not liked, they were part of a village community in which the ties to fellow peasants were much stronger than those to the Communist state. In some villages, poor peasants wrote letters in support of their richer neighbours. Meanwhile, richer peasants quickly sold their animals and stopped hiring labourers so that they could slip into the ranks of the middle peasants.

Many local party officials opposed the policy of forced collectivisation, knowing that it was unworkable. They were unwilling to identify as kulaks good farmers who were valuable to the community. They also knew that collectivisation would tear the countryside apart. So Stalin enlisted an army of 25,000 urban party activists to help to revolutionise the countryside. After a two-week course, they were sent out in brigades to oversee the collectivisation process, backed by the local police, the OGPU (secret police) and the military. Their task was to root out the kulaks and persuade the middle and poor peasants to sign a register demanding to be collectivised. The land, animals, tools, equipment and buildings would be taken from the kulaks and used as the basis for the new collective farm, the creation of which the activists would then oversee.

The so-called 'Twenty-five Thousanders' had no real knowledge of how to organise or run a collective farm, but they did know how to wage class warfare. 'Dekulakisation' went ahead at full speed. Each region was given a number of kulaks to find and they found them whether they existed or not. The kulaks were divided into three categories: counter-revolutionaries who were to be shot or sent to forced-labour settlements; active opponents of collectivisation who were to be deported to other areas of the Soviet Union, often to Siberia; and those who were expelled from their farms and settled on poor land.

A decree of 1 February 1930 gave local party organisations the power to use 'necessary measures' against the kulaks. Whole families and sometimes whole villages were rounded up and deported. The head of the household might be shot and his family put on a train for Siberia or some distant part of Russia. Others would be sent off to the Gulag labour camps or to work in punishment brigades building canals, roads or the new industrial centres. Up to ten million people had been deported to Siberia or labour camps by the end of the collectivisation process.

The Communists also mounted a huge propaganda campaign to extol the advantages of collective farms and to inflame class hatred. In some areas this was effective. Many poorer peasants did denounce their neighbours as kulaks. Sometimes this was an act of revenge for past grievances but, of course, it was to the advantage of the poor peasants to get their hands on their neighbours' animals and equipment for the new collective. Children were encouraged to inform on their neighbours and even on their parents. One thirteen-year-old girl denounced her mother for stealing grain.

Peasant resistance

The peasants resisted collectivisation bitterly despite the mass deportations. There were riots and armed resistance. One riot lasted for five days and armoured cars had to be brought in to restore order. In many instances troops had to be brought in. Peasants burned crops, tools and houses rather than hand them over to the state. Raids were mounted to recapture animals that had already been taken into the collectives. Action by women often proved the most effective form of opposition. Women's revolts were reported in the press. Kaganovich, a member of the Politburo, recognised that 'women had played the most advanced role in the reaction against the collective farm'. The women's protests were carefully organised, with specific goals such as stopping grain requisitioning or retrieving collectivised horses. They reckoned, sometimes correctly, that it would be more difficult for troops to take action against all-women protests. The government found their tactics difficult to deal with.

One of the main forms of resistance was to slaughter animals and eat or sell the meat rather than hand over the beasts to the kolkhoz. Mikhail Sholokhov described this graphically in his novel *Virgin Soil Upturned* (1935):

> 'Kill, it's not ours any more ... Kill, they'll take it for meat anyway ... Kill, you won't get meat on the collective farm ... And they killed. They ate until they could eat no more. Young and old suffered from stomach ache. At dinner-time tables groaned under boiled and roasted meat. At dinner-time every one had a greasy mouth ... everyone blinked like an owl, as if drunk from eating.'

ACTIVITY

Imagine you are a party activist. Use Sources 11.1–11.4 on pages 158–159 to write a speech explaining to peasants the advantages of joining a collective farm and encouraging them to take part in the great experiment of 'socialist construction'.

D What impact did collectivisation have on the peasants?

FOCUS ROUTE

Make notes on:

a) why Stalin halted and then restarted the collectivisation process in 1930–31
b) the consequences of collectivisation
c) what happened in agriculture after 1934.

By the end of February 1930, the party claimed that half of all peasant households had been collectivised – a stunning success. In reality, it was an agricultural disaster on a huge scale. The most enterprising peasants had been shot or deported, agricultural production disrupted, and a huge number of animals slaughtered – around 25–30 per cent of all the cattle, pigs and sheep in the USSR (mostly eaten by the peasants). Peasants who had been forced into collectives were in no mood to begin the sowing season and the level of resistance was high. This was fed by rumours in some areas that women were about to be 'socialised' and that there were special machines to burn up old people.

Knowing that further peasant resistance could lead to the collapse of grain production, Stalin backtracked. He wrote an article for *Pravda* in March 1930 saying that his officials had moved too far too fast. They had, he said, become 'dizzy with success'. This was probably not far from the truth. Young, ferocious and militant urban activists had got carried away, competing with each other to see who could get the most households into collectives. Central government seemed to have little direct control over what was happening in the provinces. Stalin called for a return to the voluntary principle and an end to coercion. Given the choice, a huge number of peasants abandoned the new collective farms and went back to farming for themselves.

But once the harvest had been gathered in, Stalin restarted the campaign and it was just as vicious as before. Throughout 1931 peasants were forced back into the collectives they had left, so that by the end of the year large areas of the USSR had been collectivised, taking in over 50 per cent of peasant households. The peasants had already paid a terrible price for their resistance and lack of co-operation. But worse was to come.

The famine of 1932–34

While collectivisation proceeded apace, the state continued to requisition grain. The state had collected 22.8 million tons of grain by the end of 1931, enough to feed the cities and to export to finance the industrialisation drive. However, this had taken place against a huge drop in grain production, largely caused by the chaos and upheaval of collectivisation (see Source 11.16 on page 166). This was partly due to the activists' lack of farming knowledge and the skills to run collectives properly, but there were other reasons. For instance, there were not enough animals to pull the ploughs (because the peasants had eaten them) and tractors had not arrived in sufficient numbers to fill the gap. To make matters worse, there was a drought over a large area of the USSR during 1931.

By the spring of 1932, famine had appeared in parts of the Ukraine and, after a temporary respite following the harvest of 1932, it spread to other areas. From late 1932 until well into 1934, the USSR was subject to a famine which killed millions of peasants. In his exhaustive study *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), Robert Conquest puts the figure as high as seven million although other historians have suggested it was much lower. But all historians accept that the scale of human suffering was enormous. One reason why it is difficult to give exact numbers is that the scale of the famine was largely unacknowledged by the Soviet regime. It did not want to admit that collectivisation had failed to deliver. But it seemed to go further than this. According to Conquest, collectivisation had become the weapon to break peasant resistance and to deal once and for all with the 'accursed problem' as Communists called the peasant question.

Conquest cites the example of the Ukraine which was, he believes, singled out for special treatment because of the strength of Ukrainian nationalism and opposition to collectivisation. As the 'breadbasket' of Russia, the Ukraine had been set high targets for grain procurement in 1931 and 1932 (over seven million tons each year), even though the total amount being produced was falling rapidly. Thousands of extra officials, backed by detachments of OGPU, were drafted in to root out hidden stocks of grain held by peasants – and root it out they did, in brutal requisitioning gangs (see Source 11.14 on page 168). This condemned hundreds of thousands to starvation. Worse than this, Conquest claims that requisitioned grain was left rotting in huge dumps or in railway sidings while starving people could not get access to it. In some areas, groups did make attacks on grain dumps, only to be punished later. Many were shot while others were rounded up and deported to labour camps.

While other historians do not see the famine as being directly sought by Stalin, most acknowledge that the Communist government was determined to procure grain at any cost. This is borne out by the continued export of grain to other countries – 1.73 million tons in 1932 and only slightly less the following year – during the worst period of the famine.

The government brought in strict laws to ensure that grain was handed over. A law of 7 August 1932, which became known to many peasants as the Law of the Seventh-Eighths (passed on the seventh day of the eighth month), prescribed a ten-year sentence for stealing 'socialised' property, which could mean a few ears of corn. This was later changed to the death sentence. Decrees in August and December laid down prison sentences of up to ten years for peasants selling meat and grain before quotas were fulfilled. Peasants tried to escape famine-hit areas by fleeing to the cities and other areas. The Soviet government brought in internal passports to control the vast movement of people.

The net result of the government's policy was the death of millions of peasants in the Ukraine, the north Caucasus, Kazakhstan and other parts of the USSR. It is difficult to reach any other conclusion than that the famine of 1932–34 was man-made. It was the direct result of the upheaval caused by collectivisation – the purging of the peasants who had the best farming expertise, the poor organisation of the new collective farms, the lack of machinery and fertilisers, the lack of know-how, and the resistance of peasants who slaughtered animals and refused to work hard on the land. This was compounded by government policy which continued to take excessive amounts of grain from the worst-hit areas and export it abroad to pay for industrial equipment.

SOURCE 11.6 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 had 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 11.7 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 11.8 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 babes were buried on the banks of the roadside, and each wilderness had its crop of little crosses.

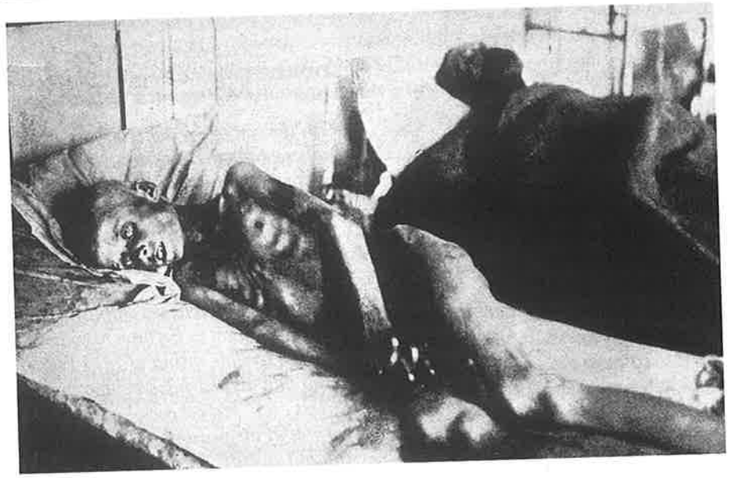
ACTIVITY

Use Sources 11.6–11.14 on pages 166–168 to answer these questions.

1. What impression do you get of the dekulakisation and collectivisation process from Sources 11.6–11.11?
2. Given Sholokhov's background (Source 11.12), how valuable do you think his novel is as historical evidence?
3. Look at Sources 11.13 and 11.14. Do they change your answer?
4. What justification or explanation of the process is provided by Communists in Sources 11.12–11.14?
5. What value, if any, does a novel like Sholokhov's have for historians looking at collectivisation?

SOURCE 11.9 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 11.10 A famine victim, 1932



SOURCE 11.11 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 11.12 M. Sholokhov, *Virgin Soil Upturned*, 1935, pp. 71–73. Sholokhov was an active Communist who wrote this pro-collectivisation novel. But he was horrified by what he saw of dekulakisation and wrote a letter to Stalin condemning the 'disgusting methods' that officials used. In his reply Stalin acknowledged that officials were guilty of crimes but claimed that Sholokhov did not appreciate the other side of the picture, that the peasants were engaged in sabotage and 'waging what was in essence a "quiet war" against the Soviet power – a war of starvation, Comrade Sholokhov'. In this extract from Sholokhov's novel, 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 11.13 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 11.14 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 women'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.

Collectivisation after 1934

At the end of 1934, it was announced that 70 per cent of peasant households were in collectives, rising to 90 per cent in 1936. Individual peasant landholdings were gradually squeezed out. Grain production began to recover slowly but did not exceed pre-collectivisation levels until 1935 (1930 being an exceptional year). Meat production did not pass pre-collectivisation levels until after 1953. Grain procurement continued at a high level throughout the 1930s, whatever the harvest.

The problem was lack of incentive – the peasants had nothing to work for. They were supposed to get a share in the profits of the farm at the end of the year but there never were any profits. They practised a form of passive resistance shown in apathy, neglect and petty insubordination on the newly created kolkhozes. The state could do little about it. On many farms the chairman (usually a Communist) was changed regularly because he could not get the peasants to perform.

This made the private plots on collectives very important. It was the only way peasants could earn something for themselves. Peasants could sell their products on the local market. The state did not hinder them because the economy desperately needed food. It has been estimated that these private plots provided 52 per cent of vegetables, 57 per cent of fruit, 70 per cent of meat and 71 per cent of milk as well as butter, honey and wool to Soviet consumers.

The peasants referred to collectivisation as the 'second serfdom'. They were tied to land they did not own. They could not leave the farms without the permission of the authorities. Draconian laws would punish them if they stepped out of line. However, Sheila Fitzpatrick in her book *Stalin's Peasants* (1994) maintains that the peasants developed all sorts of ways of subverting the farms and turning matters to their advantage. The peasants had been broken by collectivisation but they had not been totally crushed.

SOURCE 11.15 Extracts from peasants' letters to *Our Village*, a peasant newspaper, concerning the first collectivisation drive, 1929–30. These letters were not actually published in the newspaper

Ivan Trofimovitch

I am a poor peasant. I have one hut, one barn, one horse, three dessyatins *of land . . . Isn't it true that all the poor peasants and middle peasants do not want to go into the kolkhoz at all, but you drive them in by force? . . . [In my village] poor peasants came out against it . . . they did not want serfdom.*

Pyotr Gorky

Every day they send us lecturers asking us to sign up for such-and-such a kolkhoz for eternal slavery, but we don't want to leave our good homes. It may be a poor little hut, but it's mine, a poor horse, but it's mine. Among us, he who works more has something to eat . . . Let the peasant own property. Then we assure you that everyone will be able to put more surpluses on the market.

Unnamed peasant

Comrades, you write that all the middle peasants and poor peasants join the kolkhoz voluntarily, but it is not true. For example, in our village of Podbuzhye, all do not enter the kolkhoz willingly. When the register made the rounds, only 25 per cent signed it, while 75 per cent did not . . . If anyone spoke out against it, he was threatened with arrest and forced labour . . . Collective life can be created when the entire mass of the peasants goes voluntarily, and not by force . . . I beg you not to divulge my name, because the Party people will be angry.

COLLECTIVISATION CASE STUDY: SMOLENSK

The Smolensk Archive was seized from the Nazis by US troops in 1945, having been abandoned by Soviet forces in 1941. It contains a lot of information about changes in agriculture in the province of Smolensk. It tells the story of how collectivisation was carried out and how the peasants responded to it. The following account is a summary of the findings from the Smolensk Archive. Source 11.15 contains extracts from the archive.

Before collectivisation, 90 per cent of the population lived on the land. In 1927, five per cent of households were classified as kulaks, 70 per cent middle peasants and 25 per cent as poor peasants. During 1927–28, increasing pressure was applied to the kulaks. They were made to pay heavier taxes and higher wages for hired labourers; they were prosecuted for grain speculation and concealment.

After September 1929, activists were sent to the area to intensify the campaign against the kulaks and to speed up grain deliveries. But they found it difficult to get local support. Often the 'kulaks' were respected village leaders linked by blood ties to poor and middle peasants. The villagers maintained their solidarity against the Soviet authorities. Even more problematically, the activists found that local soviet members and party workers sided with the peasants.

As the activists could get little co-operation, they took harsher measures. All peasant households were required to deliver fixed quotas of grain, with penalties or even prison sentences for failure to do so. If households failed to deliver their quota, 'workers' brigades' would descend and seize their grain. The peasants responded by hiding grain and attacking activists. In October 1929, ten chairmen and eight party secretaries of village soviets were murdered. The OGPU were called in to support the activists and a 'pall of terror' enveloped the villages. In court cases it was found that almost half of the offenders were middle and poor peasants; they were condemned as ideological kulaks.

Shortly after this, Smolensk was hit by the first collectivisation drive (1929–30) characterised by 'storm' tactics. The local soviets and party workers could not be trusted to carry out effective dekulakisation or organise the kolkhozes, so brigades of urban workers, the 'Twenty-five Thousanders' (see page 163), were used.

OGPU reports reveal a picture of chaos and confusion. There was a wave of panic in the villages. Kulaks were dekulakising themselves – selling all they owned, leaving their property to relatives and friends, even just abandoning their fields and homes. Growing numbers were fleeing east to Moscow and the Urals. There was a reported wave of suicides amongst richer households with well-to-do peasants killing their wives and children as well as themselves. While some poor peasants were pleased to see the attacks on the kulaks, other poor and middle peasants colluded with kulak friends to protect their lives and property. Petitions were collected testifying to the good character of kulaks who were on the lists.

There was also a lot of antagonism towards the kolkhozes, as the extracts from the letters in Source 11.15 show. In one incident in September 1929, 200 peasants attacked a kolkhoz, destroying equipment and clothes. The majority of the attackers were women armed with pitchforks, spades and axes. There were numerous instances of burned barns, haystacks and houses. The OGPU noted the heavy involvement of women in these outbursts against the collectives.

Generally, the halt to collectivisation in March 1930, after Stalin's 'dizzy with success' article in *Pravda* (see page 164), was well received. The archives show how the local officials and activists were really out of control, arresting whomever they pleased, including many middle peasants, often on the basis of vicious rumour. There were cases of activists blackmailing kulaks to take their names off the confiscation and deportation lists.

But by March 1931, Smolensk was again the subject of intense dekulakisation. Lists of kulaks were collected by village soviets. Activists set about liquidating kulak households and deporting whole families. The OGPU reported that there was much sympathy in the villages for the deported. Nevertheless, the process of collectivisation went ahead with over 90 per cent of peasant households in kolkhozes by the end of the 1930s.

Although there are gaps in the Smolensk Archive about how the collective farms operated, it is full of complaints about inefficiency, poor chairmen, lax working practices, drunkenness, thievery and worse abuses. The picture is one of apathy from the ordinary kolkhoz members and lack of enthusiasm for life on a collective farm.

ACTIVITY

1 Compare the material from the Smolensk Archive with what you have already read about collectivisation. List the points where the specific detail here agrees with the general picture and the points where it disagrees.
2 What does the archive tell us about the kulak response to the pre-collectivisation grain seizures?
3 What does the archive show us about the behaviour and actions of the activists and their relations with the kulaks?
4 Think about the value of the archive to historians. Remember, it was collected by the Soviet authorities.
   a) Do you think we can trust the general picture it presents of collectivisation?
   b) What view of the peasant response is clear from the unpublished letters?
   c) Do you think these letters are useful and reliable evidence for historians?

E Was collectivisation a success?

FOCUS ROUTE

Assessing collectivisation

Draw up a table to make notes on your assessment of collectivisation. You can use the table shown here or make notes under your own headings. You might also like to design a more interesting way of setting out your notes, for example, in a flow diagram or spider diagram.

Use the sources and information which follow to complete your table or diagram. At the end of this section you are going to use these notes in an essay which considers the overall successes and failures of Stalin's economic policies in the 1930s.

Ways in which collectivisation was economically successful for the government	**Ways in which collectivisation was politically successful for the government**
Ways in which collectivisation was an economic failure	**The human cost of collectivisation**

ACTIVITY

Study the figures in Source 11.16 and answer the following questions.

1 How can you explain the figures for grain harvests from 1928 to 1935?
2 What is the significance of the state procurement of grain in relation to the overall grain harvest over the same period?
3 Why are the grain export figures significant?
4 Analyse and explain the figures for animals over this period.

SOURCE 11.16 Agricultural output and state procurement of grain, 1928–35, from A. Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917–91*, 1992, pp. 180, 186

	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935
Grain harvest (million tons)	73.3	71.7	83.5	69.5	69.6	68.4	67.6	75.0
State procurement of grain (million tons)	10.8	16.1	22.1	22.8	18.5	22.6		
Grain exports (million tons)	0.03	0.18	4.76	5.06	1.73	1.69		
Cattle (million head)	70.5	67.1	52.3	47.9	40.1	38.4	42.4	49.3
Pigs (million head)	26.0	20.4	13.6	14.4	11.6	12.1	17.4	22.6
Sheep and goats (million head)	146.7	147.0	108.8	77.7	52.1	50.2	51.9	61.1

Any assessment of collectivisation reveals a very mixed picture. Economically, it appears to have been a disaster. The fact that grain harvests dropped dramatically in the early 1930s when grain was most needed and did not recover to their 1928 level (apart from 1930 which was an exceptional year) until the latter half of the 1930s is a damning indictment. This is an even worse performance when you compare the figures with the last harvest of tsarist Russia in 1913 (see Source 7.18 on page 112). The Soviet Union also lost a huge proportion of the animal population, a loss from which it did not really recover until after the Second World War.

However, although the overall grain harvest declined in the early 1930s, state procurements did not. The state collected the grain it needed to feed the rapidly growing workforce and to sell abroad to pay for industrial equipment. What is more, dispossessed peasants from the overpopulated countryside fled to the towns, so providing labour for the new factories. Collectivisation had succeeded in its main purpose – to provide the resources for industrialisation.

This view, however, has been challenged by several historians. They believe that valuable resources had to be diverted to agriculture: because of the need to build large numbers of tractors, for example, and to send out agronomists and large numbers of activists and secret police. Furthermore, the USSR did not get as much foreign money for its grain as it had hoped because the GREAT DEPRESSION had forced down world grain prices.

GREAT DEPRESSION
A world economic slump that began in 1929 with the Wall Street Crash and lasted until the beginning of the Second World War.

On top of this, the human costs were horrendous. The suffering cannot be quantified, particularly for those who not only lost their homes but ended up in the Gulag prison camps. Roy Medvedev estimates that some ten million peasants were dispossessed between 1929 and 1932, of whom around two or three million lost their lives. Then we must add the cost of the famine. Robert Conquest estimates around seven million died, five million of them in the Ukraine alone. Whatever the actual figure, it represents an inexcusable episode in Soviet history.

For the party, collectivisation was an essential part of its modernisation drive. The party did not want a sizeable sector of the economy to be dominated by the private market or to be at the mercy of the peasants who hoarded grain. In this sense, collectivisation was a political success. The party gained control of the villages and did not have to bargain with the peasants any more. It had established a system, using local soviets and MTS, of controlling the countryside and making agriculture serve the towns and workers.

SOURCE 11.17 C. Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 1993, p. 47

What happened between November 1929 and December 1931 cannot be grasped merely by reciting statistics ... a socio-economic system in existence for five hundred years vanished for ever. But the whirlwind which swept across the countryside destroyed the way of life of the vast majority of the Soviet people, not just the Russians ... Early in 1930, countless individuals and families in entire regions and republics – the Russian, Ukrainian and Caucasian grain districts – were stigmatized as kulaks, driven from their land, forced into collectives, exiled or shot. Central Asian cotton growers and sugar beet farmers in the Central Black Earth region suffered the same fate in 1931.

SOURCE 11.18 R. Service, *A History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, 1997, pp. 181–82

With the exception of 1930, mass collectivisation meant that not until the mid-1950s did agriculture regain the level of output achieved in the last years before the Great War. Conditions in the countryside were so dire that the state had to pump additional resources into the country in order to maintain the new agrarian order ... to agronomists, surveyors, and farm chairmen but also to soldiers, policemen and informers. Moreover, 'machine-tractor stations' had to be built from 1929 to provide equipment for the introduction of technology.

Yet Stalin could draw up a balance sheet that, from his standpoint, was favourable. From collectivisation he acquired a reservoir of terrified peasants who would supply him with cheap industrial labour. To some extent, too, he secured his ability to export Soviet raw materials in order to pay for imports of industrial machinery ... Above all, he put an end to the recurrent crises faced by the state in relation to urban food supplies as the state's grain collections rose from 10.8 million tons in 1928–9 to 22.8 million tons in 1931–2. After collectivisation it was the countryside, not the towns, which went hungry if the harvest was bad.

TALKING POINT

Use the information and sources on pages 171–172 to discuss the statement: 'Collectivisation was a political success but an economic failure and a human disaster.'

KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER 11 Was collectivisation a success?

1. Collective farms were the socialist solution for agriculture, changing individualistic peasants with capitalist tendencies into agroworkers.
2. Stalin also wanted to bring the peasants under control and ensure the food supply needed for his plans to industrialise the Soviet Union.
3. There was a lot of support for his programme amongst the urban working classes but a high level of resistance from the peasantry.
4. Stalin used force, terror and propaganda to collectivise Soviet agriculture at high speed. Brutal methods were used, including mass arrests, mass murder and the deportation of hundreds of thousands of peasants.
5. Peasants resisted by slaughtering and eating their animals and fighting the activists who carried out collectivisation.
6. The impact on agriculture was disastrous. Grain production fell and there was a tremendous drop in the number of animals.
7. In 1932–34 a famine, largely the result of government policies, killed millions of peasants.
8. Vast numbers of peasants fled the countryside to become industrial workers in the new booming industrial centres.