

THE SOVIET UNION'S POLICY OF ONE-SIDED DEVELOPMENT OF UZBEKISTAN'S AGRICULTURE THROUGH COTTON CROP

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Annotation: This article examines the Soviet Union's policy of one-sided development of Uzbek agriculture through cotton cultivation and its consequences.

Keywords: cotton belt, food shortage, water shortage, large irrigation projects, textile industry, monoculture farming, long-term environmental and economic problems.

The Soviet Union implemented a centralized, one-sided agricultural policy in Uzbekistan, forcing the republic to specialize in cotton production at the expense of other crops and economic diversification. This approach made Uzbekistan the USSR's main cotton supplier, but it created long-term economic and ecological imbalances. The USSR designated Uzbekistan as the Soviet Union's "cotton belt" and required it to allocate up to 70% of its irrigated agricultural land to cotton. Food crops (wheat, fruits, vegetables) were neglected, leading to a local food shortage despite the high cotton yield. Moscow established strict production quotas, requiring collective farms to deliver a set amount of cotton to the state. Purchase prices were artificially low, ensuring that profits went to the Soviet central budget, not to Uzbek farmers.

The Soviet Union's large-scale irrigation projects (such as canals diverting the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers) were built to grow cotton. This led to environmental disasters, including the shrinking of the Aral Sea, soil salinization, and water shortages. "Uzbekistan, having become the main cotton base of the Union, took a leading position among the Soviet republics in this regard. The republic ranked third in gross cotton production after the United States and China. Uzbekistan accounted for 80% of the cotton exported from the USSR abroad". During the Soviet era, Uzbekistan emerged as the USSR's primary cotton-growing base and played a key role in the Union's agricultural and economic policies. By the mid- to late 20th century, the republic had become the leading cotton producer among all Soviet republics, supplying a significant portion of the USSR's cotton needs. Uzbekistan ranked third in the world in cotton production. The republic accounted for more than 70% of the Soviet Union's total cotton production, making it the backbone of the country's textile industry. Uzbekistan accounted for 80% of the USSR's cotton exports, supplying raw materials to Eastern Bloc countries and international markets.





Due to the Soviet-era monoculture farming policy, Uzbekistan's economy often became dependent on cotton at the expense of other crops and environmental sustainability. Large irrigation projects, such as the diversion of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, were implemented to support cotton farming and led to environmental problems such as the Aral Sea tragedy. After World War II, the Soviet government implemented a series of policies aimed at restoring and expanding cotton cultivation in Uzbekistan, which had suffered from labor shortages, resource depletion, and damage to infrastructure during the war years. It adopted a resolution "On the Plan and Measures for the Restoration and Further Development of Cotton Cultivation in Uzbekistan in 1946-1953" . The Soviet state prioritized cotton over food crops, deepening Uzbekistan's economic dependence on this single commodity. The construction of the Great Fergana Canal improved water distribution but created long-term environmental stress.

The USSR increased mandatory supply quotas, leaving a small surplus for domestic consumption. By 1950, Uzbekistan had surpassed prewar cotton production, helping the USSR meet its industrial needs. Uzbekistan consolidated its position as the Soviet Union's largest cotton supplier, accounting for more than 70% of total output. Over-irrigation led to soil salinization and water depletion, leading to the Aral Sea crisis. Food shortages were exacerbated by the neglect of grain and vegetable production. Harsh working conditions, including child labor during harvests and forced labor, became systemic. This period was the peak of Soviet cotton dominance in Uzbekistan, and the beginning of long-term environmental and economic problems that persisted even after independence.

During the Soviet era, the Uzbek cotton industry made a significant contribution to the economy of the USSR. "Every year, the sale of cotton products brought the union budget 5 billion soums" . This large revenue stream demonstrated Uzbekistan's important role as the Soviet Union's main cotton supplier. The annual 5 billion soums earned from Uzbek cotton helped finance Soviet industrialization, infrastructure projects, and other Union-wide expenditures. A significant portion of this revenue went to cotton exports, as Uzbekistan supplied 80% of the USSR's cotton exports, mainly to Eastern Bloc countries and world markets. The Soviet state set fixed purchase prices for cotton, often below world market rates, and ensured high returns to the central budget at the expense of Uzbek farmers. As Uzbekistan was forced to prioritize cotton over other crops, the republic became economically dependent on this





sector, while local fiscal revenues were restored. Despite bringing billions in revenue to Moscow, much of the revenue was diverted to other Soviet republics, and Uzbekistan's industry and infrastructure remained underdeveloped. Intensive irrigation for cotton led to water scarcity, soil degradation, and the drying up of the Aral Sea.

In short, cotton harvesting relied on mass mobilization, including forced labor (students, community workers) and child labor in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Workers endured low wages and harsh conditions without much benefit from their labor. The bulk of the textile industry took place outside Uzbekistan, which remained a supplier of raw materials.

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