

AGRARIAN REFORMS UNDERTAKEN BY THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT IN UZBEKISTAN AND THEIR SOCIETAL CONSEQUENCES (1950s – 1960s)

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Abstract

The article reflects the agrarian policy of the Soviet government towards Uzbekistan in the late 50s and early 60s of the twentieth century. The inconsistency of the reforms carried out under the leadership of N. S. Khrushchev is shown. The inefficiency of the development of virgin lands, which, as all historians admit, was carried out by extraordinary state measures, forcibly, is shown. It also led to a sharp depletion of the fertile layer. The low standard of living of the peoples of Central Asia. The article describes the activities carried out in Uzbekistan, the result of which led to further monopolization of cotton culture and exacerbation of the environmental problem.

Keywords: Agrarian reform, cotton monoculture, party, cellinik, agrograd, "The Great Decade", Union Republics, price scissors, Khrushchev period, state farms, Center.

Introduction

The agrarian reform carried out by the former USSR in the late 1950s and early 1960s underscores the original utopianism of socialism as an "ideal world," the construction of which cost millions of lives and which proved "unsuitable" for solving economic, social, and national problems. The Center controlled all matters of the country's life, including the national economy. The former union republics unconditionally followed the Center's directives. Uzbekistan was no exception. The Republic was forced to implement social and economic programs and plans devised outside its borders and often failing to take its interests into account.

In these plans, Uzbekistan was assigned the role of a raw-materials appendage. This determined the one-sided character of economic development, with unfinished production technologies that did not allow the rich raw-material resources to be converted into finished products. The postwar years were difficult, and the situation in agriculture was dire: labor resources decreased significantly, and the production of raw cotton and other agricultural products declined sharply. Yet, as in other sectors, agricultural policies were defined by party directives and decrees.

In one important party decision (1946), measures were outlined to restore and raise cotton growing during 1946–1953. However, this decision did not take the interests of the local

population of Uzbekistan into account and was effectively aimed at developing a cotton monoculture [1.C.45-108].

The reforms carried out under N. S. Khrushchev's leadership were very contradictory. At the XX CPSU Central Committee Plenum in September 1953, he determined concrete measures aimed at raising agriculture and improving the situation of the peasantry. Their essence boiled down to reducing the taxation of kolkhoz members, lowering the quotas for compulsory state deliveries from private subsidiary plots; writing off debts on compulsory deliveries of livestock products; and raising purchase prices for cattle, poultry, milk, butter, and potatoes. As early as 1954, the taxation procedure changed. Now the tax was levied based on the size of the household plot, rather than the number of livestock, fruit trees in the orchard, beehives, and so on. In that same year, tax rates were halved compared to those of 1952. In 1952–1958, procurement prices increased: for large cattle, by twelvefold; for wheat, by sixfold [2]. Overall, the procurement prices for agricultural products rose almost three times. These new purchase prices also applied to products produced in household subsidiary farms.

It should be noted that from the 1930s through the 1990s in the USSR, the state, through kolkhozes, carried out forced requisitioning of grain and other agricultural products at low, state-controlled prices. These “price scissors,” that is, a price policy artificially maintained by the state under which industrial goods were relatively expensive and agricultural goods relatively cheap, enabled the extraction of many billions from the countryside and their redistribution in favor of the military-industrial complex. This was accomplished through compulsory deliveries, which from 1958 were called state procurement.

Uzbekistan was a kind of cotton plantation for the Soviet Union. Between 1960 and 1990, the area of irrigated lands in Uzbekistan increased by two million hectares, which accounted for about 60 percent of all irrigated lands in Central Asia. The Republic produced two-thirds of all-Union cotton output [3.P.12-89]. In 1958, raw cotton production in the Soviet Union amounted to 4,335 thousand tons, of which 2,946 thousand tons came from Uzbekistan [4.C.47-49]. It was also especially noted at the Extraordinary XXI Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which was held from 27 January to 5 February 1959, that “the Uzbek SSR will continue to be the main cotton base of the country. Therefore, in the upcoming Seven-Year Plan, primary attention will be paid to the development of cotton growing and related industries. On a large scale, irrigation construction will be deployed. Engineering for the needs of cotton growing will advance. The overall volume of industrial production is expected to increase approximately 1.8-fold during the Seven-Year Plan” [5.C.514].

During the Khrushchev period, state-farm construction was actively encouraged, that is, in the agrarian sphere the share of state farms grew. New state farms were established on virgin and fallow lands, and by converting economically weak kolkhozes burdened with large state debts into state farms [6].

The “cultivation of the Virgin Lands” became perhaps the largest agrarian project implemented during Khrushchev's era. Pursuant to the directives of the XXI Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan and the Council of Ministers of the Uzbek SSR, on 3 August 1959 the Uzbek SSR adopted decrees on the development and irrigation of

virgin lands in the Central Ferghana Valley for 1959–1965 [7.C.103]. To cultivate the virgin lands, 10,000 young men and women were sent. The development of the Virgin Lands was carried out amid a loud propaganda campaign in the press, on radio, and in films. An attractive image of the “celinnik” was created—a young educated person who, overcoming hardships in a bare steppe, with a stake driven into the frozen ground, begins to build a new state farm—an “agro-town” [8.C.171]. Articles were also published about the enormous importance of the desert’s development for the Republic. In 1961, the newspaper Pravda published an article “To Storm the Deserts,” which noted that about 70 percent of Uzbekistan’s territory was desert. According to Soviet authorities’ calculations, on each million hectares of newly irrigated land one could obtain up to 1.5 million tons of raw cotton, 500 thousand tons of rice, and many other products. Substantial investments made in irrigation and land development would pay off within two to three years thanks to the value of the resulting products [9]. To implement the plan for cultivating and irrigating virgin lands and deserts, by the decree of the Council of Ministers of the Uzbek SSR dated 29 October 1959, No. 827 “On the National Economic Plan of the Uzbek SSR for 1960,” a plan was approved for resettling 3,500 households, including 1,650 to kolkhozes and 1,850 to state farms of the Republic [10].

The agrarian policy pursued by the Soviet government also affected children. To meet the cotton-picking quotas set by the Center, schoolchildren were also mobilized. Instead of studying, they were in the cotton fields. As of 1964, students in rural schools spent 45 to 65 school days picking cotton; in urban schools, 23 to 45 days [11]. Consequently, pupils were unable to fully master the curriculum, and the use of pesticides in agriculture severely undermined children’s health.

After Stalin’s death, the interdependence of the Soviet republics on each other continued to expand. In the economy, this meant that Uzbekistan, for example, supplied cotton to all regions (80 percent of its exports), but was forced to import grain, meat, coal, etc., from other republics. All of this was part of the Center’s deliberate policy, which thus firmly bound the republics to Moscow (all management of these processes was directed from Moscow) and to one another [12.C.80].

The agrarian policy of the Khrushchev period (1958–1963) led agriculture into crisis. This is evidenced by the rates of growth in gross agricultural output. In 1951–1955, it grew by 20.5 percent; in 1956–1960, by 30 percent; in 1961–1965, by 18 percent [13]. By the early 1960s, the negative consequences of the earlier policies and the inherent defects of the command system began to accumulate and surface. A continuous decline in the growth rates of the Soviet economy began. The “Great Decade” ended in a collapse of popular trust in the authorities and Khrushchev’s forced resignation.

The development of the Virgin Lands helped little, as, according to all historians, it was carried out by extraordinary state measures and by force. Excessive plowing of virgin lands and breakdown of crop rotations led to dust storms and a sharp depletion of the fertile layer. Contrary to the rosy plans, meat, milk, and bakery products began to disappear from store shelves.

The low standard of living could not but provoke popular discontent. Their protests, which manifested everywhere, were no secret to the country's leadership or to Khrushchev himself. In a number of cities that the First Secretary of the Central Committee visited, he encountered popular outrage. In Tashkent, many dissatisfied citizens gathered in the streets regarding the ban on keeping livestock in worker settlements [14.C.99].

As a result, under the agrarian policy pursued by the Center, agriculture fell into decline, and Uzbekistan could not supply its population with necessary agricultural products. It was widely propagated that Uzbekistan was to ensure the country's independence in raw cotton. "White gold" was obtained by brutal methods. Those who refused to comply were removed from their posts, and in their place were installed those who proclaimed "We will catch up and overtake" and "We will fulfill the Five-Year Plan in two years."

The irrigation and development of virgin lands, the creation of new cotton-growing districts, and the expansion of cotton acreage led to the further monopolization of cotton cultivation. This, in turn, exacerbated unresolved food-supply and ecological problems and heightened social tensions in the Republic.

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