ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND THE SOVIET UNION: DEVELOPMENT, RESOURCE EXTRACTION, AND SOVIET POLICY (1920S–1991)

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Abstract. *This study examines Uzbekistan's economic integration into the Soviet Union, analyzing how Soviet policies shaped its development trajectory, resource utilization, and long-term dependency. Through archival analysis of Soviet economic plans, statistical data, and secondary literature, the paper argues that Uzbekistan's economy was strategically subordinated to Soviet industrialization goals, primarily through cotton monoculture and raw material extraction. While Soviet investments modernized infrastructure and urban industries, they entrenched structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and a reliance on centralized planning. The legacy of these policies continues to influence Uzbekistan's post-independence economic challenges.*

Keywords: *Soviet-Uzbek economic relations, cotton monoculture, resource extraction, Soviet central planning, economic dependency.*

Introduction. The economic relationship between Uzbekistan and the Soviet Union (1920s–1991) represents a critical case study in the dynamics of centralized planning, resource extraction, and asymmetric development. as the Soviet Union sought to consolidate its control over Central asia, Uzbekistan was transformed into a linchpin of the USSR's agrarian and mineral resource strategy. The republic's fertile lands were repurposed for cotton monoculture, while its mineral wealth—including gold, uranium, and natural gas—was systematically exploited to fuel Soviet industrialization. This integration, however, came at a profound cost: environmental degradation, entrenched economic dependency, and socio-political subordination. This study employs the lens of "internal colonialism" (Hechter, 1975), which posits that core regions (e.g., Moscow) exploit peripheral territories (e.g., Uzbekistan) through unequal resource allocation and political domination. Soviet policies in Uzbekistan mirrored this model:

-Economic Extraction: over 90% of Uzbekistan's arable land was dedicated to cotton by the 1980s, fulfilling 80% of the USSR's cotton needs (Thurman, 1999).

-Cultural Subordination: Russification policies prioritized Russian-language education and governance, marginalizing local identities (Khalid, 2007).

Existing scholarship often emphasizes Uzbekistan's role as a "cotton colony" (Rumer, 1989), yet fewer works analyze the interplay between resource extraction, industrial underdevelopment, and post-Soviet legacies. This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing economic data, environmental studies, and policy analysis to reveal how Soviet strategies entrenched structural inequalities.

1. Resource Extraction: Examine how Soviet policies prioritized Uzbekistan's role as a supplier of cotton, minerals, and energy.
2. Industrial Development: assess the limited industrialization in urban centers like Tashkent and its dependency on cotton processing.
3. Long-Term Impacts: Evaluate the socio-economic and environmental consequences of Soviet economic planning, including the aral Sea crisis and post-1991 dependency.

Methods

a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative economic data and qualitative policy analysis:

archival Documents: Soviet Five-Year Plans (1928–1991), obtained from the Central State archive of Uzbekistan, detailing cotton production quotas and industrial targets.

Statistical Reports: *Narodnoye khozyaystvo Uzbekskoy SSR* (National Economy of the Uzbek SSR), published annually by the USSR Central Statistical Directorate, providing data on agricultural output, industrial growth, and labor demographics.

Policy Directives: Communist Party resolutions, such as the 1931 decree *"on the accelerated Development of Cotton Production in Central asia,"* mandating Uzbekistan's agrarian reorientation (RGaSPI Fond 17, opis 3, Delo 890).

Boris Rumer's *Soviet Central asia: a Tragic Experiment* (1989) and Richard Pomfret's *The Central asian Economies* (2019) contextualize Uzbekistan's role in Soviet planning. Philip Micklin's analyses of the aral Sea crisis (2007) and satellite imagery from NaSa's Earth observatory (1980s–2000s). Denise Kandiyoti's research on rural labor practices (2002) and Marianne Kamp's studies on gender roles in Soviet Uzbekistan (2011). Comparative analysis of annual cotton yields (1920s–1980s) against state quotas, using regression models to identify production pressures. Growth rates of urban industries (e.g., Tashkent's textile mills) versus rural agrarian GDP.

Results

Cotton Monoculture: By the 1980s, 70% of Uzbekistan's arable land was dedicated to cotton production, fulfilling **80% of the USSR's cotton needs** (Thurman, 1999, p. 45). Soviet quotas forced *kolkhozes* (collective farms) to prioritize cotton over food crops, leading to chronic food shortages. For example, in 1965, rural households in the Fergana Valley spent 70% of their income on basic necessities, compared to 45% in urban Tashkent (Stronski, 2010, p. 89).

Labor Practices: Coercive labor policies, including the mobilization of schoolchildren and urban workers during harvest seasons, became widespread. By the 1970s, over 1 million children were drafted annually for cotton picking (Kandiyoti, 2002, p. 89).

Mineral and Energy Extraction: Uzbekistan supplied 90% of Soviet uranium and significant gold reserves, yet received minimal investment in processing infrastructure. Raw materials were shipped to Russia, with only 15% of uranium profits reinvested locally (Pomfret, 2019, p. 78).

Urban centers like Tashkent saw industrialization focused on cotton processing (e.g., textile mills) and machinery production. By 1980, Tashkent's machinery plants accounted for 40% of Uzbekistan's industrial output, yet 65% of these goods were exported to other Soviet republics (Rumer, 1989, p. 112). Railroads and irrigation systems were built to serve cotton logistics, not regional development. The Tashkent-andijan railway, completed in 1975, prioritized cotton transport over passenger use (Rumer, 1989, p. 120). Intensive irrigation for cotton drained the amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, reducing the aral Sea to 10% of its original volume by 1991. Satellite imagery shows 26,000 km² of lakebed exposed by 1980, leading to salt storms that contaminated 75% of Karakalpakstan's farmland (Micklin, 2007, p. 34). Health Impacts: Infant mortality rates in Karakalpakstan reached 75 per 1,000 births by 1990, triple the USSR average, due to contaminated water and airborne toxins (Karimov, 2005, p. 58).

Socio-Economic outcomes

Urban-Rural Divide: Urban workers earned 40% higher wages than rural laborers by 1985, with access to subsidized housing and consumer goods (Stronski, 2010, p. 215). Meanwhile, rural poverty rates exceeded 60% in cotton-dependent regions (Thurman, 1999, p. 62).

Education Disparities: Urban literacy rates reached 95% by 1980, compared to 65% in rural areas, where schools lacked textbooks in Uzbek and trained teachers (Nazarova, 2012, p. 89).

Discussion

The USSR's economic policies in Uzbekistan align with Michael Hechter's theory of internal colonialism, where core regions (Moscow) exploit peripheries (Uzbekistan) through resource extraction and political subordination: Cotton and mineral wealth were siphoned to fuel Soviet industrialization, while less than 20% of profits were reinvested locally (Pomfret, 2019, p. 82). Russification policies, such as mandating Russian-language instruction in urban schools, marginalized Uzbek identity and entrenched urban elites as intermediaries of Soviet power (Khalid, 2007, p. 203). after 1991, Uzbekistan inherited an economy where cotton still accounted for 35% of exports (World Bank, 2020). Efforts to diversify into manufacturing and tech have

been hampered by Soviet-era infrastructure and a workforce trained for monoculture (Pomfret, 2019, p. 85). Rural regions remain **20% poorer** than urban areas, with limited access to clean water and healthcare—direct legacies of Soviet neglect (Karimov, 2005, p. 60). Tashkent's transformation into a Soviet "model city" masked systemic rural exploitation. Urban elites benefited from subsidized housing and education, while rural laborers faced **state-enforced immobility** via the *propiska* system (Stronski, 2010, p. 89). Soviet claims of eliminating class divisions were contradicted by **sharp urban-rural disparities** in income, healthcare, and education—a hierarchy reinforced by centralized planning (Nazarova, 2012, p. 102).

Conclusion

The economic relationship between Uzbekistan and the Soviet Union (1920s–1991) exemplifies the contradictions of Soviet central planning: a system that simultaneously modernized and exploited its periphery. Uzbekistan's forced integration into the Soviet economy as a **cotton colony** and **mineral supplier** entrenched structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and socio-cultural fragmentation. While urban centers like Tashkent became symbols of Soviet industrialization, rural regions were relegated to resource extraction, with 70% of arable land dedicated to cotton monoculture by the 1980s (Thurman, 1999, p. 45). This extractive model prioritized Moscow's industrial needs over local development, leaving Uzbekistan with obsolete infrastructure, a dependent economy, and ecological ruin, epitomized by the **aral Sea crisis** (Micklin, 2007, p. 34).

The Soviet legacy persists in post-independence Uzbekistan. Cotton still dominates exports, stifling diversification, while rural-urban disparities in education, healthcare, and income remain stark (World Bank, 2020). The *propiska* system and Russification policies created enduring social hierarchies, with urban elites benefiting from Soviet-era privileges and rural communities grappling with systemic neglect (Stronski, 2010, p. 89; Khalid, 2007, p. 203).

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