

The Negative Impact of The Cotton Monoculture Policy on The People of Qashqadaryo

(Based on The Materials of the "Qashqadaryo Haqiqati" Newspaper)

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Abstract: This article provides a multifaceted analysis of the negative impacts of the cotton monoculture policy on the population of Qashqadaryo region, based on the 1986–1987 issues of the «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» newspaper. The ecological crisis, forced labor, food insecurity, deterioration of social infrastructure, family disintegration, corruption, and demographic changes are examined through concrete statistical indicators cited in the newspaper materials. The article is aimed at reinforcing the principal conceptual and evidentiary foundation of the dissertation through the analysis of Soviet systemic problems based on primary sources.

Keywords: Cotton monoculture, Qashqadaryo region, 1970–1991, negative impact, ecological crisis, forced labor, food security, social infrastructure, family crisis, corruption, demographic consequences, primary source, glasnost, Soviet agrarian policy.

Introduction: Qashqadaryo region is located in the central part of Uzbekistan and has historically been known as a territory specializing in agriculture, and cotton cultivation in particular. In the 1970s, the Soviet central government further intensified the policy of subordinating the region's agriculture almost entirely to cotton production. This process continued until the late 1980s and brought numerous negative consequences to the lives of the region's population.

The materials published in the 1986–1987 issues of the «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» newspaper constitute an important primary source that documents these negative consequences at the regional level. Although, as an official publication, it could not fully reflect the truth, considerably more incisive critical materials were published in 1986–1987 under the influence of the glasnost policy.

The aim of this article is to systematically reveal the multifaceted negative impact of cotton monoculture on the population of Qashqadaryo by synthesizing newspaper materials from both years, and to reinforce the conceptual foundation of the master's thesis.

The relevance of the topic lies in the fact that the actual state of Soviet-era agriculture, the lives of the working classes, and regional problems have not yet been fully studied in contemporary Uzbek historiography. Primary sources — newspapers of that era — help to partially fill this gap.

METHOD

Forced Labor: A Systemic Problem of Qashqadaryo Region — One of the gravest consequences of the cotton monoculture policy was the compulsory mobilization of the population for the cotton harvest.

The materials of the «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» newspaper confirm this practice with specific figures.

According to data from the July 22, 1986 issue: more than 4,000 people were mobilized for fieldwork in the Kitob and Muborak districts, constituting one-third of the working-age population. The December 18, 1986 issue revealed an even broader scale: of the 143 cotton-producing farms in the region, 139 — 97 percent — failed to meet their cotton sales quotas. Only 603 out of 3,483 brigades (17 percent) fulfilled their quotas.

The materials from the November 13, 1987 issue show that forced labor encompassed not only adults but also students and pupils. History faculty students from Qarshi State Pedagogical Institute harvested cotton in the fields of the «Kommunist» sovkhoz in Nishon district. More than 350 students from vocational school No. 32 in Shahrisabz worked at the «SSR 50-letiya» sovkhoz in Nishon district. This demonstrates that cotton forced labor extended beyond the rural population to urban youth as well.

The ineffectiveness of forced labor is likewise supported by evidence: mechanized harvesting in 1986 was completed at only 37 percent, with the remainder picked by hand. In Guzor district, only 33 percent of the cotton sales plan was fulfilled; in Chiroqchi district, 44 percent; in Bahoriston district, 46 percent. The unrealistic setting of quotas meant that even the forced labor mechanism failed to produce results.

The 1986 newspaper materials provide concrete figures on the ecological crisis. The 65 industrial enterprises in the region were discharging approximately 300,000 tons of harmful substances into the atmosphere annually. Wastewater from enterprises in Kitob city was flowing untreated into the Qashqadaryo, Oqsuv, and Tankhozdarya rivers. Specialists emphasized that the observed increase in viral hepatitis among children was linked to ecological contamination.

The 1987 issues added a new dimension to the ecological problems. In Muborak district, a forest reclamation station had been established four years earlier to protect agricultural crops from wind and dust erosion, but its resources remained limited. The contamination of the region's major rivers caused damage not only to public health but also to the agricultural irrigation system.

The wasteful use of water resources posed a particular threat. Water use in the Guzor, Kamashi, Yakkabag, and Kitob districts was unregulated. Flood irrigation and draining water into collectors had become widespread practice. According to 1986 data, cotton seeds failed to germinate on 30,000 hectares — itself a manifestation

of the systemic problem with water supply.

Cotton monoculture had a direct impact on food security. Planting only cotton on irrigated land while neglecting fodder crops fundamentally undermined the feed base for livestock. The 1986 newspaper materials specifically emphasized that “the fodder problem is becoming more acute with each passing year.”

The concrete livestock indicators were dismal: in half of the district's farms, the semi-annual milk production plan was not met; in one-third, the meat production plan was not fulfilled. Each cow yielded an average of 590 kilograms of milk — only 30 percent of the planned quota. These indicators attest to the serious food insecurity in which the region's population was living in the mid-1980s.

During the correspondent's visit to the field camp at the «Qoraboq» sovkhoz, reported in the November 13, 1987 issue, the female cotton pickers openly stated they had been eating without meat for two months. This situation reflects not only injustice in working conditions but also the general food insecurity of the population — the expansion of land under cotton reduced food production.

Cotton monoculture channeled state resources primarily toward the agricultural sector, leaving social infrastructure neglected. The 1986 materials document this process in three key areas — education, healthcare, and housing construction — with concrete figures.

In education: 61 percent of the region's 770 schools were housed in unadapted buildings, and schools were accepting more students than their designated capacity allowed. In healthcare, the situation presented a dual problem: on the one hand there were insufficient hospitals, and on the other, existing medical facilities were being used “unsatisfactorily.” Housing construction was described as proceeding “very slowly,” with more than 6 million square meters of housing required to be built over three five-year periods.

Healthcare problems were articulated even more plainly in the 1987 issues. Newspaper editor V.A. Sosnin, who spoke at the plenum, stated: “We encountered many difficulties in preparing an article about problems in the medical field.” The regional healthcare department had resisted publishing a report on “the increase in hepatitis” and the shortage of medical personnel.

The 1987 issues also reveal another troubling detail: the Kamashi cotton ginning factory had been operating without a functional heating system, ventilation, or sanitary facilities. As a result, the factory's operations

were suspended in November by a trade union decision. This incident must be regarded as a concrete manifestation of social injustice in working conditions.

One of the gravest and most frequently overlooked consequences of the cotton monoculture policy is the disintegration of families and the demographic crisis. This problem was documented with concrete figures in the article “Do Not Be the Ruin of Your Children’s Happiness!” published in the December 20, 1986 issue of «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati.»

In 1985, 279 families divorced; in the first ten months of 1986, 215 out of 1,179 newly married couples — 18.4 percent — broke up. The article identified the main causes of divorce as economic hardship, parents being compelled to spend much of the year harvesting cotton in the fields, and alcoholism among men. In 1985 alone, between 500 and 600 children were left without a father or mother.

The November 13, 1987 issue highlighted another demographic problem — the social marginalization of rural women. In Demovabad, Chiroqchi, and Kitob districts, a patriarchal way of life remained entrenched; women there regarded their role as limited to bearing children and were almost entirely absent from social life. The first secretary of the regional Komsomol committee, M. Saidmurodova, emphasized at the plenum that “18,000 women under the age of 30 are not engaged in socially productive labor.”

This indicator reveals the gender dimension of the cotton monoculture policy: women were, on the one hand, conscripted into forced cotton harvesting and, on the other, excluded from the formal labor market. These two contradictory conditions combined to deepen the demographic crisis.

The materials of «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» reflect two levels of corruption. The first level is large-scale corruption at the upper echelons, in the context of the judicial proceedings known as the “cotton affair.” In the December 18, 1986 article, the newspaper wrote that in the region, “bribe-takers and embezzlers of state property continue to be found.”

The second level is petty corruption within the lower administrative ranks. The manipulation of prices on 25 tons of rice at the Kitob district consumer society procurement office, embezzling 5,000 roubles, and the discovery of 26,000 roubles in cash and gold coins on the perpetrators — these serve as examples of lower-level corruption.

In the 1987 materials, the problem of “good on paper, but in practice?” at factories and enterprises took on a new dimension. Although the introduction of a two-shift work regime was reported as having been

implemented, labor productivity actually declined. “When indicators improved on paper, additional output was not actually achieved in practice,” Karimov emphasized at the plenum. These falsified reports constituted a distinctive form of corruption.

The systemic cause of corruption is clear: the cotton monoculture policy directed all state resources into a single sector and centralized management. This situation provided lower-level executors with the opportunity to steal allocated budgets or avoid penalties through falsified reports. The system itself created the conditions for corruption.

The article “The Labor of Cotton Workers Must Be Valued” and the “The Contribution of the People of Beshkent” materials in the November 13, 1987 issue provided a detailed account of the working conditions of rural laborers, particularly during the cotton harvest season. These materials constitute a unique document showing the social consequences of the cotton policy “from below” — from the perspective of ordinary workers.

In the field camps: there was no proper dining area for the female pickers, bedding was insufficient, electric lights were not working, and the room designated as a nursery had only 4 cots — the remaining children slept on the floor. The medical worker came only in a nominal capacity, and the sanitation log did not reflect reality.

For the urban offices of Beshkent, however, the picture was different. It was reported that the cotton headquarters of the Beshkent city Soviet worked around the clock, with more than 200 people participating in the cotton harvest and results being properly documented. Yet it was noted that “not all employees of organizations and institutions *сходимлари* — some office workers managed to avoid going to the cotton fields.

This disparity is highly significant: more lenient demands applied to urban representatives, while in the countryside, forced labor under harsh conditions prevailed. This was yet another manifestation of social injustice.

A comparative analysis of the 1986–1987 materials from the «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» newspaper substantiates the following conclusions regarding the negative impact of the cotton monoculture policy on the population of Qashqadaryo.

First, the negative impacts were multifaceted and systemic in character. Extending far beyond agricultural problems, they encompassed the economic sphere (industrial decline, corruption), the ecological sphere (contamination, water waste), the social sphere

(education, healthcare, housing), the demographic sphere (family disintegration, alcoholism), and the labor sphere (forced labor, inadequate conditions).

Second, the negative impacts of cotton monoculture extended across all social strata of the region. Rural farmers, factory workers, students, women, and children — all became victims of this policy. However, the heaviest burden fell on rural laborers — particularly women and young people.

Third, a comparison of 1986 and 1987 data also identified positive changes: mechanized harvesting doubled, and some plans were fulfilled. However, systemic problems — forced labor, inadequate field conditions, food shortages, and corruption — persisted. These changes demonstrate that the cotton monoculture system could not be reformed from within.

Fourth, two characteristics define the value of the 1986–1987 issues of «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» as primary sources: a) the statistical data and concrete facts cited in the newspaper were drawn from official documents, ensuring that they reflect the real economic situation; b) the reportages on social problems (conditions in field camps, medical facilities, education) constitute a unique source for the life of the “lower strata” of that era.

CONCLUSION

The primary source data drawn from the 1986–1987 issues of the «Qashqadaryo Haqiqati» newspaper provide a clear and systematic account of the negative impacts of the cotton monoculture policy on the population of Qashqadaryo region (1970–1991).

In terms of forced labor: mobilizing one-third of the working-age population for fieldwork, sending students and pupils to the cotton harvest, and subjecting them to harsh rural conditions — all of these trampled upon citizens’ right to freely choose their employment. In ecological terms: 300,000 tons of harmful emissions into the atmosphere annually, the contamination of rivers and water bodies, and the wasteful use of water resources — all of these sharply deteriorated the health and living standards of the population. In socioeconomic terms: the livestock plan being fulfilled at only 30 percent, 61 percent of schools housed in substandard buildings, and the shortage of hospitals — all of these demonstrate the impoverishment of the social sphere resulting from the channeling of state resources into the cotton sector.

In demographic and family terms: the disintegration of hundreds of families annually, thousands of children being separated from their parents, and the social marginalization of women — these must be assessed as

the gravest direct harm inflicted on people’s lives by the cotton policy. In political terms: the appointment of I.A. Karimov to regional leadership in December 1986, and his public acknowledgment of the shortcomings of the cotton policy in that same position in December 1987, carry important significance in the subsequent historical context.

This article forms part of the primary evidentiary foundation for the 1986–1987 section of the master’s thesis on the topic “The Negative Impact of the Cotton Monoculture Policy on the People of Qashqadaryo (1970–1991)” and reinforces the conceptual basis of the dissertation.

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