



CENTRAL ASIA XII. ECONOMY IN THE 19TH-20TH CENTURIES

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When the Russians arrived in Central Asia in the 1860s they found a predominantly agrarian economy. As in other parts of the dry heart of Asia and the Middle East two forms of agriculture existed: sedentary farming, mainly based on irrigation, and livestock herding. There were several areas of irrigated land, especially in the Farḡāna (Ferghana) Valley, and along the Zarafšān (Zarafshan), Amu Darya, Morḡāb, and Tajen (Tejen) rivers. Oases along the Kopet Dagħ were supplied with water from underground tunnels (*kārīz*). The main grain crops were wheat, barley, and sorghum. Some dry farming of grain occurred in hilly areas. Rice was grown where surplus water was available. Alfalfa was sown in rotation with cotton as a fodder crop. A variety of vegetables and fruit was grown, especially melons, apricots, and grapes. Farming techniques were primitive. The main tools were a hoe (*ketman*) and a small plow (*āmāj*). Crop rotation was little practiced.

Sedentary farmers kept livestock for plowing, transportation, and working irrigation wheels, but the largest numbers were herded by the desert nomads, such as the Turkmen, Karakalpaks, Kipchak Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, and by the Kirgiz and Tajik mountain herders. Cattle, including oxen, were kept both by



farmers and nomads, but sheep were mainly herded by nomads. Goats, donkeys, horses, and camels were also found.

The Russians saw Central Asia as a potential producer of their requirements for cotton. Under their control the area under irrigation was expanded, especially towards the end of the century when work on the Mirzachol Sahra (Golodnaya Step') and the Murghab Imperial Domain schemes was virtually completed. In the Farḡāna valley cotton acreage also increased. In the 1880s American-type cotton was introduced which improved both quality and production (Semenov et al., p. 458).

The substitution of cotton for food crops in Central Asia created no major problem until the Revolution. In 1918 the region became completely cut off from grain supplies from Russia. Although the situation improved in the following year, local farmers began to sow grain instead of cotton. Unrest in the region due to the activities of anti-Communist partisans (*bāsmačī*) caused the destruction of irrigation systems and a drop in food production. Between 1919 and 1923 there were severe famines and over one million people died (Park, pp. 330-31).

Between 1922 and 1928 the Soviet authorities restored the irrigation systems and reverted to the pre-Revolutionary policy of exclusively growing cotton on irrigated land. In 1930 collectivization began in Central Asia, resulting in a decline in cotton production. By this time the Soviet Union had become virtually self-sufficient in cotton and such a drop was unwelcome (Korzhenevskii, p. 225, Dzhamalov, I, p. 252). Further expansion of the area under cotton was achieved by the construction of new canals and irrigation projects. The most notable developments were the Great Farḡhana Canal, completed in 1939, the expansion of the Mirzachol Sahra scheme, and the extension of the main Turkmen Canal to Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan by 1962 (Carne, pp. 197-209).

At mid-19th century industry in the modern sense did not exist. The nomads produced only carpets, rugs, and felt, but even the urbanized Uzbeks and Tajiks had only a handicraft of small workshop industry. The main branch of industry was the processing of cotton, wool, and silk and the production of a small quantity of textiles. Most of the processed cotton went to Russia (Schuyler, I, p. 296).

After the Russian occupation of Central Asia in 1865 attempts were made to



develop industry and a search for raw materials began. Some poor quality coal was mined in several locations and oil was extracted in the Farghana Valley and in Turkmenistan. Some copper and iron ore was mined. However, before 1917 little industry was developed and the independent amirate of Bukhara had not even been explored for mineral deposits. The processing of cotton, leather tanning, wool washing, and silk spinning were still the major activities (Park, pp. 269-74).

The Trans-Caspian Railroad (to Samarkand by 1888 and the Farghana Valley by 1899) and the Orenburg-Tashkent Railroad (completed in 1906) were the main transportation routes. Most industry was located close to these lines. The Turkistan-Siberia Railroad was completed in 1930 with the idea of delivering more grain to Central Asia and releasing more land for cotton growing.

Between 1928 and the outbreak of World War II industrial development accelerated. Thermal and hydro-electric power stations were built to support industrialization. A large textile plant was built in Tashkent. An agricultural machinery plant, fertilizer plants, and mechanized cotton gins all served the cotton industry. In 1946 a small steel plant was put into operation at Bekabad (Begovat) in Uzbekistan using scrap metal, iron ore from the Urals and coal from the Kuznets basin and Karaganda. During the period between 1945 and the present there has been further development of industry serving the cotton grower, including the manufacture of fertilizers, irrigation equipment, and cotton machinery. Large dams on the Vaqš (Vakhsh), Naryn, and Chirchiq Rivers have increased electric power production. A new energy resource was first tapped in the 1950s when large deposits of natural gas were found at Gazli near Bukhara and at Jarkak and Murabek in the southeast of Uzbekistan. Pipelines run to Tashkent, Samarkand, and the Fargāna Valley, but much gas leaves the region by pipeline to the Urals. Mining of metallic minerals includes copper and molybdenum at Almaliq, near Tashkent, lead at Chimkent, and lead, zinc, mercury, and antimony in Tajikistan. Uranium is found in the Fargāna Valley and Kirgizistan. The chemicals industry is supplied with sulphur from central Turkmenistan and sodium sulphate from the shores of the Kara Bogaz Kol on the Caspian Sea. Phosphorite for chemical fertilizer plants comes from southern Kazakhstan. A large chemical plant at Dushanbe in Tajikistan uses local sodium chloride and power from the large Nurek dam. This dam also supplies power to an aluminum plant using alumina from the Urals (Matley, 1967, pp. 332-37, idem, 1981, pp. 420-25).

In spite of the development of Central Asian industry the economy is still



based on the growing of cotton. Industry is designed to serve that activity, and the region is virtually self-sufficient in the production of equipment and supplies for the cotton industry. Other branches of agriculture and industry are poorly developed. In other words, Central Asia shows a high degree of regional specialization. Apart from cotton, natural gas is the only major export of the region. Unless Central Asia frees itself from a planned economy designed mainly to serve the interests of the Soviet Union and diversifies its agriculture, its future seems to be tied to cotton production. The rapid growth of population in the last few decades has created a demand for further employment in industry or emigration outside the region. In the past there has been little movement of people to other parts of the Soviet Union, but with the future possibility of freer emigration abroad it is possible that Central Asians may seek work in countries of the Middle East or South Asia.

A factor that may limit regional development is the large-scale pollution, which has contaminated the soils and waters, especially of Uzbekistan, because of the uncontrolled use of fertilizers and pesticides in the growing of cotton. The problem is compounded by the shrinking in area of the Aral Sea, caused by the excessive use of the rivers that drain into it for the purposes of irrigation. Large areas of salts have formed on the edge of the shrinking sea, and these salts have been spread by the wind over the surrounding countryside creating conditions harmful to most plants. These problems present a major threat not only to the future development of agriculture but also to the quality of life of the population, but it is difficult to see how they can be easily solved.

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