



THE IMPACT OF SOVIET AGRARIAN POLICY ON IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE IN THE FERGANA VALLEY

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Abstract

This article analyzes the policies and measures implemented in the field of water management and irrigated agriculture in the Fergana Valley during the years of Soviet rule, particularly between 1917 and 1922. It examines the nationalization of land and water resources by the Soviet government, the establishment of the cotton monopoly, the introduction of forced labor, and the negative effects of the policy of War Communism on agriculture. The study highlights the organization and restoration of irrigation systems, including the repair of major hydraulic structures such as the Kampirravot Dam, the Yangiariq Canal, and others. At the same time, it emphasizes the imposition of forced labor on the population, including the mobilization of women and children in collective work campaigns. Based on scholarly sources, the article explores the drastic decline in agricultural production, the deterioration of living standards, famine, and the intensification of resistance movements caused by political and economic instability as well as natural disasters. The study underscores the historical lessons of water management for independent Uzbekistan and provides scientific conclusions regarding its future prospects.

Keywords: Water management, irrigation, Fergana Valley, Turkestan, Soviet policy, cotton monopoly, War Communism, forced labor, agriculture, land committee, Kampirravot Dam, Yangiariq Canal, Andijonsoy, Shahrikhonsoy, Polomon, rural peasants, food requisitioning, farm properties, social stratification, impoverishment, hydraulic structure, land reclamation, rural associations, Irrigation Technical Committee, famine.



INTRODUCTION

In the context of independent Uzbekistan, the management of water resources and the development of irrigated agriculture represent issues of exceptional urgency. This is because the productivity of agriculture—the backbone of the national economy, particularly cotton production and other export-oriented crops—as well as food security and socio-economic stability, largely depend on the efficiency of irrigation systems.

The current challenges and prospects of water management cannot be defined solely by the introduction of modern technologies or the improvement of administrative mechanisms. They also require a thorough study of historical experiences, including the consequences of the agrarian and irrigation policies pursued during the Soviet era. While the construction of large hydraulic structures, the development of new lands, and the implementation of water distribution measures under Soviet rule contributed to economic growth, they also generated ecological problems, entrenched cotton monoculture, and exacerbated social inequalities.

Today, the effective use of water resources, the modernization of existing irrigation systems, the assurance of ecological sustainability, and the enhancement of agricultural productivity necessitate a critical analysis of the political and economic practices of the Soviet period. Studying these historical processes provides an opportunity to avoid strategic mistakes in contemporary water management policy, to ensure the rational use of existing resources, and to lay a solid foundation for the country's long-term development strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

In preparing this article, various methods were employed, including the historical-analytical method, comparative-typological approach, source studies and document analysis, statistical analysis, territorial-geographic approach, sociological and social analysis, systems approach, and oral history.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It must be acknowledged that during the Soviet period, water management experienced a certain level of development: large hydraulic structures were built,



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irrigated agriculture was transferred onto new socio-economic and technical foundations. However, in terms of scope, these large-scale undertakings were subordinated to a policy of exploitation and colonial domination. The agrarian policy of the Soviet government represented the logical continuation of the policy implemented under the Tsarist administration [1, p. 288]. To this end, the Soviet authorities introduced an economic policy aimed at establishing socialist state ownership across all sectors of economic life, centralizing leadership of the national economy, and conducting governance through administrative-command methods [2, p. 244].

Consequently, the first step involved the confiscation of the region's land and subsoil resources, forests, and waters. During the years of authoritarian rule, the region was transformed into a raw material base, and the cultivation of cotton increased steadily year after year. The cotton monoculture, whose foundations had been laid under the imperial government, was fully consolidated under Soviet rule in the guise of the so-called "struggle for cotton independence." The expansion of irrigated agriculture, as well as the reclamation of virgin and fallow lands, was likewise directed primarily toward increasing cotton production. All measures undertaken in this field were managed directly by the "Union" central government.

After the October 1917 coup d'état, the Soviet government that came to power sought to complete the projects in irrigated agriculture that had been planned but left unrealized during more than forty years of Tsarist colonial domination in the Fergana Valley—most notably, the policy of turning the valley into a raw material base for the central industries.

The first deformative measure introduced by Soviet power in the agrarian sector was manifested in the Decree on Land, announced on October 26, 1917 [3, p. 10]. For the first time, the decree stated that "the right to private ownership of land is abolished forever; land cannot be sold, purchased, leased, mortgaged, or otherwise alienated."

The resolution issued by the People's Commissariat for Land Affairs of Turkestan on December 9, 1917, began implementing the provisions of the decree by prohibiting all transactions concerning immovable property in Turkestan—



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including land, irrigation facilities, and networks—whether through sale or mortgage [4, p. 170].

From January 1918 onwards, the provincial, district, and volost land-and-water committees established during the colonial period of Tsarist Russia were dissolved. In their place, new committees composed of poor, landless peasants loyal to the Soviet state were formed. The main tasks of these committees included compiling inventories and registers of local lands, informing rural populations about the essence of land confiscation and the abolition of large estates, overseeing the redistribution of confiscated lands, regulating procedures for supplying agricultural tools and equipment, promoting the principles of collectivism in agriculture, and explaining the advantages of communes and agricultural cooperatives (artels).

As a result of these measures, between April 1918 and April 1919, in Andijan district of Fergana province, the estate of Mirkomilboy Mirmo‘minboev amounting to 407 desyatinas was confiscated [5, p. 42]. In Skobelev district, the estates of 22 wealthy households totaling 12,315 desyatinas were seized, as well as 75,000 desyatinas of land belonging to prosperous peasant households in 50 Russian villages* established in the valley during the imperial “resettlement” policy [6, p. 29]. Along with the land, their agricultural tools, draft animals, and livestock were also expropriated [7, pp. 86–87].

The majority of the lands confiscated by the land committees were, by special decree, redistributed to poor landless peasants and choryakkors*.

Indeed, according to the agricultural census conducted in the Fergana Valley in 1917, sharecroppers (choryakkor) accounted for 32.2 percent of cotton-growing households in Andijan district, 24.8 percent in Margilan district, 20.1 percent in Namangan district, and 12.7 percent in Kokand district [8, p. 56]. Despite the complex and contradictory socio-political and economic conditions in the region, the main objective of Soviet power was to secure raw cotton, supply the central textile industry with cotton, and meet the clothing needs of the Red Army. As

* The aforementioned villages and landholdings were located throughout the entire territory of the valley, which at that time formed part of Fergana province. Some of them are now situated within the present-day Jalal-Abad, Osh, and Batken regions of the Kyrgyz Republic.

* Choryakkor – a landless peasant who rented land from a wealthy landowner on the basis of a mutual agreement. In most cases, such tenant farmers cultivated the land in return for one-quarter of the harvested crop.



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noted above, one of the key directions of the Soviet agrarian policy was to place the leading cotton sector of the region under full control and management of the Supreme Council of the National Economy, which on January 12, 1918, adopted a decree “On the Monopoly of Cotton Production” [9, p. 17]. According to this decree, all issues related to cotton production and trade were placed under state control, and it was announced that all existing cotton reserves in the country were to be declared state property.

As a logical continuation of this policy, entrepreneurial associations in Turkestan were dissolved, and market relations were repudiated. Beginning on January 21, 1918, free trade in grain in the region was prohibited, while private property owners were branded as parasites [10, p. 248]. On February 26, 1918, F. Kolesov, chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Turkestan, issued a decree “On the Confiscation of Cotton in the Region” [11, p. 11]. The decree stipulated that all cotton in Turkestan, regardless of its form or location, was to be confiscated and declared state property. All soviets and railway committees were instructed to implement this decree by transporting cotton to railway stations and immediately dispatching it to Tashkent. In the event of resistance by the owners, the decree authorized measures up to and including execution on the spot [11, p. 11].

To implement its agrarian policy at the provincial, district, volost, and village levels, the Soviet government established class-based peasant organizations such as the “Committees of the Poor,” “Peasant Associations,” and “Qo’shchi” unions [10, p. 280]. The primary tasks of these organizations included propagating communist ideology among peasants, consolidating poor peasants, combating landowners, accelerating processes of social stratification in villages, strengthening the authority of Soviet organs at the local level, and providing practical assistance in organizing agricultural production.

As a result of these measures, by the first half of 1918, more than 330 enterprises in the region belonging to various industrial sectors—including cotton ginning and oil-extraction plants, cotton raw material stocks, railways, banks, and mines—were confiscated in favor of the state and placed under workers’ control [12, p. 33]. Prior to 1914, these enterprises had produced more than 80 percent of the region’s industrial output [13, p. 103]. However, enterprises placed under



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workers' control ceased their activities due to a lack of capital and raw materials and, most importantly, because the "new masters" entrusted with management lacked the necessary skills and competence.

According to the decree, 3.4 million poods of cotton fiber, 6 million poods of raw cotton, 600,000 poods of cottonseed oil, 4 million poods of cottonseed, and 1.1 million poods of oil cake were transferred to the state free of charge within a short period [10, p. 248]. Peasants received no payment for the cotton taken from their homes or delivered to factories, not even at a fixed price [14].

This situation in the economic life of the region led to a sharp decline in cotton purchase prices, the impoverishment of peasant households, and the elimination of material incentives for cotton cultivation. As is known from historical sources, between 1918 and 1921 the Soviet government implemented the policy of "War Communism" throughout the country, including in Turkestan. By its essence, this policy relied on the use of military force in all spheres to extricate the state from crisis.

In reality, the policy was based on the coercive direct exchange of products between town and countryside, aimed not at feeding the famine-stricken population but rather at supplying the Red Army defending the revolution at the front and the working class, considered the principal support of Bolshevik power and the "master" of the Soviet regime [10, p. 246]. The food tax was abolished and replaced by *prodrazvyorstka*, the forcible requisition of agricultural products from peasants for state needs. To enforce this, armed food detachments composed of poor peasants were organized locally. Retail trade was prohibited. As a result of this policy, peasants lost their motivation to continue farming.

An important component of the "War Communism" policy was the militarization of labor, which, like other Bolshevik measures, was intended to mobilize production and labor resources by coercion in the interests of consolidating socialist statehood and strengthening Soviet power [15, p. 166]. In practice, this meant subjecting the labor process to universal state control, establishing coercive production discipline based on punishment, and instituting universal labor obligations. This militarized approach to governance and economic management resulted in unprecedented waves of violence against all segments of the population. After the region was placed on a military footing, "iron discipline"



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was enforced across sectors. Even minor offenders could be brought before tribunals, prosecuted by “military courts,” declared “saboteurs” or “deserters from the labor front,” and severely punished under wartime laws. The practice of forcibly mobilizing the population for unpaid compulsory labor became widespread [15, pp. 166–167].

Meanwhile, drought further aggravated the situation in agriculture. The new government’s socio-economic policies directed against the people intensified popular resentment and ultimately sparked armed resistance in the Fergana Valley against the authoritarian Soviet regime [16, p. 40]. The ensuing military operations inflicted severe damage on the national economy, particularly on agriculture and irrigation infrastructure.

As a result, agricultural production—the most vital sector of the regional economy—declined to two-thirds of the pre-war level [17; p.103]. This led to a deplorable deterioration in the standard of living of the valley’s population. The inhabitants of the valley endured the torment of famine. In the Ferghana Valley* alone, during the winter and spring of 1917–1918, a devastating famine claimed the lives of 30 percent of the province’s population [18; p.90]. In 1921, famine resulted in the death of 64,315 people [19; p.467].

The principal reason for such severe damage to agriculture was the destruction of irrigation facilities and the disruption of water distribution [20; pp.299–301], since during this period major irrigation systems in the valley—including the Kampirrovot Dam, the Polomon water distributor on the Isfayramsay, the headworks of the Yangiariq Canal in Namangan, the Ulughnahr system, and a number of other canals, ditches, and dams—had been rendered completely inoperative as a result of military operations.

As noted above, during the implementation of the “war communism” policy, all measures undertaken by the Soviet authorities in the field of irrigated agriculture were carried out exclusively through the use of military force. For instance, at the Fourth Congress of Regional Workers’, Soldiers’, and Peasants’ Soviets, held on

* At the beginning of 1917, around 2 million people lived in the Ferghana Valley. For details, see: The History of Uzbekistan. Volume I (1917–1939). Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 2019, p.249.



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19 March 1918, the resolution “On the Establishment of Land Committees in All Provinces, Districts, Volosts, and Villages of the Region” was adopted [4; p.171]. By order of the People’s Commissariat for Land Affairs of the Region, all existing irrigation networks in the area were nationalized [21; p.42]. In April 1918, recognizing that raw cotton from Turkestan was one of the key means of overcoming the central government’s economic crisis, and particularly of supplying Russia’s textile industry, instructions were issued to re-establish land and water committees throughout the region. This constituted the first step by the central government to bring the region’s land and water resources under its control.

On 17 May 1918, a decree was issued allocating 50 million rubles for irrigation works in Turkestan—plans that had been designed during the imperial colonial period but left unimplemented. According to the decree, it was envisaged to develop 10,000 desyatinas of new land in the Uchqurghon steppe of the Ferghana Valley and to regulate local water facilities irrigating 20,000 desyatinas of land in the province [22; p.8].

The main purpose of this decree was twofold: on the one hand, to ensure the supply of raw materials necessary for Russia’s textile industry, and on the other, to revive cotton production in Turkestan and thereby stabilize the political and economic situation in the region in favor of Soviet interests.

According to the resolution adopted by the Turkestan Council of People’s Commissars on 17 June 1918, the Main Department of Land Affairs was established within the Regional People’s Commissariat of Land Affairs. To assist in restoring and developing agriculture, cotton cultivation, and irrigation systems, the Irrigation Technical Committee and the Republican Water Management Administration were organized, with M.V. Rikunov appointed as the head [4; p.171].

Two months after the decree’s announcement in 1918, the “Uchkurganstroy” organization was founded to oversee the development of the Uchqurghon steppes, with engineer P.I. Pagalevich appointed as its director. The economic department of IRTUR (Turkestan Irrigation Administration) promptly received reports that the necessary equipment and materials for Uchqurghon had been dispatched. At the suggestion of IRTUR, Professor I.G. Aleksandrov of Tashkent University—



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later an academician—was engaged in the project and appointed as a member of IRTUR’s collegium, tasked with supervising the bureau responsible for the irrigation project of southeastern Ferghana lands [17; p.103].

Together with expert engineers K.N. Sinyavskii, P.I. Ragalevich, and others, I.G. Aleksandrov drafted an irrigation project that envisaged the construction of facilities to divert water from the Naryn River in order to irrigate the Uchqurghon steppe as well as the southeastern part of the valley [23; p.80]. According to their calculations, it would be possible to irrigate 23,300 desyatinas in the Uchqurghon steppe and 6,800 desyatinas in the Qiziljar steppe. Furthermore, experts noted that an additional 27,795 desyatinas of new lands could potentially be brought under agricultural use [24; pp.52–53].

According to the government directive, a special administration named IRTUR*, led by I.G. Aleksandrov together with T.K. Rizenkampf and A.V. Chaplugin, developed plans to address irrigation problems in Turkestan, including the Ferghana Valley. One hundred specialists from among its members were dispatched to the region.

In early June 1918, the newly established Department of Water Management of Ferghana Province convened the first provincial council of ariq elders and chief mirobs in Skobelev (Ferghana) city. At this council, measures for the restoration of the valley’s irrigation networks were discussed, and the week of June 21–28 was declared a “week of irrigation restoration and repair works” [25; p.162].

During this week, all village peasants took part in clearing canals and ariq beds, completing considerable repair work within eight days. The largest amount of earth excavation, silt clearance, and repair was carried out on the Andijonsoy and Shahrixonsoy canals, which irrigated more than 100,000 hectares, as well as on the main Kampirovot dam that supplied them. Both canals’ headworks had been significantly damaged during the 1914 Qaradaryo flood, and, since no reconstruction or repair had been conducted for nearly five years, the hydraulic structures had fallen into near abandonment. Under the project and leadership of hydro-engineer P.N. Ragalevich, a temporary earthen dam was constructed at Kampirovot, and the banks of both canals were reinforced and cleared. Similar

* Irrigation Works Administration in Turkestan



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restoration work was carried out on the Isfayram-Shohimardon system, where the Polomon and Vodil dams, built in engineering style, were repaired [26; p.25].

During the week of mobilization, the residents of Namangan city, valley dwellers, and surrounding peasants participated in clearing and repairing damaged areas in the Podshootasoy, G'ovasoy, Kosonsoy, and Chortoqsoy irrigation systems, as well as at the headworks of the Yangiariq [27; pp.72–73].

In May 1918, at the Extraordinary VII Congress of Soviets of the TASSR, the state of agriculture, particularly cotton growing, was discussed. The need for the urgent restoration and repair of irrigation facilities was identified as the most pressing issue, and a special resolution “On Land Reclamation and Irrigation” was adopted. The resolution emphasized that, in order to improve the functioning of local irrigation systems and regulate water distribution, the primary and urgent task was to restore existing headworks of canals and ariqs and construct new water distribution structures [28; p.347].

The congress also resolved to organize short-term training courses for irrigation specialists, hydro-engineers, and local ariq elders, involving experienced practitioners with practical expertise in irrigation [17; p.104]. To ensure the steady operation of Ferghana’s irrigation systems, the government allocated 500,000 rubles for 1919, of which 200,000 rubles were immediately directed to urgent spring works [29; p.72].

On 25 June 1919, a congress of all provincial irrigation specialists was convened in Tashkent to discuss water management in Turkestan. The congress concluded that organizing water management along existing administrative divisions (province, uezd, or volost) was ineffective, since even one uezd or volost was often irrigated by multiple systems. This caused unnecessary disputes and conflicts over water distribution. The congress therefore resolved that each irrigation system, regardless of how many uyezds or volosts it traversed, should be designated as a separate water district. Only in this way, it was argued, could order be established in water allocation, canal and ariq maintenance, and cleaning works [30; p.495].

Accordingly, six water districts were established in Ferghana Province: Qaradaryo, Norin-Uchqo‘rg‘on, Namangan, Isfayram-Shohimardon, So‘x-Isfara, and Moylisoy. Each water district was further subdivided into smaller irrigation



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units. This measure considerably improved the regulation of water use and the organization of maintenance works. Among these, the Norin-Uchqo‘rg‘on and Namangan districts oversaw the irrigation structures on the right bank of the Syr Darya and the left bank of the Norin River [31; p.52].

At the VIII Congress of Soviets of Turkestan, a resolution was passed to establish “general labor conscription” for the Republic’s male and female population aged 16 to 55, to carry out irrigation works. However, this decree contained serious shortcomings. Drafted according to Communist criteria, the code disregarded local customs and religious beliefs by mandating the participation of women, which contradicted long-standing traditions. As a result, local Soviet authorities resorted to coercion and intimidation in implementing irrigation measures [32; pp.259–260].

To accelerate irrigation work, the Turkkomissiya ordered that former irrigation engineers and agronomists serving in the Red Army be recalled and reassigned to their specialties [33; pp.47–48]. Wages for water management staff were increased, they were provided with food rations, and supply of construction materials and tools for local water districts was improved [34; pp.46–47]. In 1920, short-term two-month courses for hydro-engineers were opened in Skobelev (Ferghana), graduating 23 students in the first cohort [35; p.26].

Among all irrigation facilities in the Ferghana Valley, the repair of the Qaradaryo River and its largest dam, Kampirovot, required the most time and resources. Whereas in the So‘x-Isfayram, Shohimardon, and Namangan systems the key issue was proper distribution of water into canals, in Qaradaryo the main challenge was diverting sufficient water from the river itself. Resources and labor were concentrated on protecting the Andijonsoy and Shahrixonsoy canals—irrigating 100,000 hectares—from floods and ensuring that only the necessary amount of water was diverted [17; p.105].

Thus, the Kampirovot water junction became the most important hydrotechnical facility in the valley. In March 1920, engineer A.I. Budrevich was appointed its head [36; p.29]. A telephone line was installed between Andijan and Kampirovot. To carry out urgent works—repairing eroded canal banks and constructing a dam across the river—special military units were dispatched from



Andijan and Margilan [37; p.229]. The local population of Sultanabad, including water specialists and peasants, was also mobilized [38; p.79].

Taking into account the Ferghana Valley's role in supplying grain, cotton, and other agricultural products, the Soviet authorities sent A. Kalashnikov, head of the TASSR Water Management Administration, to survey the irrigation systems. With his participation, major facilities in the Baliqchi and Ulug'nahr systems were repaired in spring 1920, with food supplies for workers provided by the Andijan uezd Food Department. In March 1920, 27,551 workdays were spent cleaning 32 kilometers of the Rozenbakh canal, while 48,511 workdays were devoted to cleaning 54 kilometers of the Yangiariq system [39; p.12].

The nature and specificity of irrigation required long-term reconstruction and large financial investments. The Ferghana Valley's irrigation networks suffered more damage than those of other regions because of prolonged military operations and the heavy floods of spring 1921. Floods in the foothill rivers and streams caused severe agricultural losses. The Kampirovot water distribution node on the Qaradaryo ceased functioning, halting water supply to the valley's two largest canals, Andijonsoy and Shahrixonsoy. The Baliqchi canal, irrigating 15,000 desyatinas and supplied by the Ulug'nahr, was completely destroyed. Floods also severely damaged the Palomon, Vodil, Beshariq, Shohimardon, and Marg'ilon water distribution structures [4; p.173].

Dissatisfied with the pace of irrigation repair and cleaning works, the central Soviet government decreed on 11 May 1921 the militarization of irrigation activities in Turkestan [15; p.236]. Based on this decree, the Water Management Administration of the Turkestan Republic issued a special appeal to rural executive committees to implement measures for the restoration of irrigation facilities [40; pp.98–100].

In practice, most of the repair and excavation work carried out with local participation was enforced through compulsory unpaid labor. At that time, peasants lacked horses and tools for such tasks. Consequently, in 1921 the inhabitants of Chinobod volost (Andijan uezd) refused to participate in cleaning the Baliqchi canal. In some cases, the shortage of labor even led local Soviet authorities to mobilize 12–13-year-old children for digging works. For example,



in the O'sh water district, children were forced to participate in four rounds of canal cleaning and repair within a year [41; p.7].

Nevertheless, through the mass mobilization of the valley's population, by 1921 a total of 550 versts of 115 major canals and ariqs were cleared of silt and repaired, and 75 local structures were restored, preventing their complete collapse [42; p.52]. In the same years, peasant hashar campaigns cleaned 142 km of canals in Namangan uezd, 534 km in Qo'qon uezd, and 582 km in Xo'jand uezd, with the participation of a total of 34,000 peasants [43; p.26].

However, despite these measures, due to political instability, economic crisis, military operations, and natural disasters since 1917, irrigation systems and networks in the valley had deteriorated and become largely unserviceable. As a result, by the end of 1921, irrigated land in Ferghana Province had declined from 800,000 desyatinas in 1915 to 300,000 desyatinas [44; p.126], while cotton yields fell from 13.7 centners per hectare to 4.2 centners [45; p.6].

CONCLUSION

An overall analysis of the sources and historical processes demonstrates that the Soviet administration's irrigation and water management policy in Turkestan primarily served the interests of the central government, while neglecting the needs of the local population, and ultimately resulted in long-term ecological and social problems. At the same time, an examination of the sources and scholarly literature reveals the following:

First, the agrarian policy implemented in Turkestan between 1917 and 1921 assumed a deformational character and emerged as the first stage of agrarian reforms. The principal aim of the Soviet regime, which had seized power after the October Revolution, was to subordinate the region's natural resources to the interests of the center.

Second, during this process an administrative system based on command and coercion was established. Through the policy of War Communism, all forms of free thought, creative initiative, and independent labor potential were eliminated, while society was transformed into a militarized order.

Third, the implementation of centralized administration and total nationalization led to the abolition of private property, the destruction of market relations, and



the replacement of national and humanitarian values with class-based communist ideology.

Fourth, the region's natural resources—including water and land, as well as raw material reserves—were confiscated by the state. In economic practice, methods of expropriation and forced labor under punitive measures became dominant.

Fifth, despite the severe socio-economic conditions, measures implemented in the sphere of irrigated agriculture were carried out through the heavy labor, political pressure, and coercion imposed upon the local population.

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