

SOVIET UZBEKISTAN AND WARTIME RESISTANCES: THE ROLE OF UZBEKISTAN IN WORLD WAR II, FRONTLINE PARTICIPATION, AND SOVIET CIVILIAN MANAGEMENT POLICIES

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Abstract. The Second World War marked a pivotal chapter for Soviet Uzbekistan, as the republic became a critical node in the Soviet Union's wartime machinery. This article explores Uzbekistan's multifaceted contributions, from dispatching over 1.5 million soldiers to the frontlines to hosting evacuated industries and displaced populations, while simultaneously navigating the coercive demands of Soviet central policies. Drawing on archival records, wartime propaganda, and post-Soviet historiography, the study reveals a dual narrative of collective sacrifice and quiet resistance. While Uzbekistan's agricultural and industrial output sustained the Soviet war effort, grassroots dissent—manifested in draft evasion, religious defiance, and labor protests—underscored tensions between Moscow's authoritarian controls and local agency. The analysis also examines the republic's role as a site of forced resettlement for deported ethnic minorities, such as Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars, which reshaped its demographic and social fabric. By situating Uzbekistan within broader debates about Soviet peripheries during wartime, this article challenges homogenized narratives of Soviet unity, emphasizing instead the complex interplay of compliance, adaptation, and resistance in Central Asia.

Keywords. Soviet Uzbekistan, World War II (Eastern Front), Home Front Mobilization, Central Asia, Forced Resettlement (Deportations), Resistance, Industrial Evacuation, Red Army Mobilization, NKVD Surveillance, Cotton Production.

Аннотация. Вторая мировая война стала поворотным моментом для Советского Узбекистана, поскольку республика стала критическим узлом в военной машине Советского Союза. В этой статье исследуются многогранные вклады Узбекистана, от отправки более 1,5 миллионов солдат на линию фронта до размещения эвакуированных предприятий и перемещенного населения, при одновременном выполнении принудительных требований советской центральной политики. Опираясь на архивные записи, военную пропаганду и постсоветскую историографию, исследование раскрывает двойной нарратив коллективного жертвоприношения и тихого сопротивления. В то время как сельскохозяйственное и промышленное производство Узбекистана поддерживало советские военные усилия, инакомыслие низовых слоев населения, проявлявшееся в уклонении от призыва, религиозном неповиновении и протестах трудящихся, подчеркивало напряженность между авторитарным контролем Москвы и местными органами власти. Анализ также рассматривает роль республики как места принудительного переселения депортированных этнических меньшинств, таких как немцы Поволжья и крымские татары, что изменило ее демографическую и социальную структуру. Помещая Узбекистан в более широкие дебаты о советских перифериях во время войны, эта статья бросает вызов гомогенизированным нарративам советского единства, подчеркивая вместо этого сложное взаимодействие подчинения, адаптации и сопротивления в Средней Азии.

Ключевые слова: Советский Узбекистан, Вторая мировая война (Восточный фронт), Мобилизация на тыл, Средняя Азия, Принудительное переселение (депортации), Сопrotивление, Промышленная эвакуация, Мобилизация Красной Армии, Наблюдение НКВД, Производство хлопка

Introduction

The Soviet Union's victory in World War II (1941–1945) was achieved through the immense sacrifices of its diverse republics, yet historical narratives often prioritize the experiences of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Soviet Uzbekistan, a Central Asian republic annexed into the USSR in 1924, played an indispensable but underappreciated role in this struggle. Prior to the war, Uzbekistan had already been transformed by Soviet modernization campaigns, including forced collectivization and anti-religious policies, which sowed resentment among its predominantly rural, Muslim population (Khalid, 2015). However, the outbreak of war necessitated the rapid mobilization of all Soviet territories, and Uzbekistan emerged as a vital supplier of troops, raw materials, and industrial capacity.

This article argues that Uzbekistan's wartime experience was defined by a paradoxical duality. On one hand, the republic became a linchpin of Soviet resilience: its cotton fields fed military textile production, its factories assembled fighter planes, and its people fought in decisive battles like Stalingrad. On the other hand, Soviet policies exacerbated preexisting grievances, sparking passive resistance and fostering clandestine preservation of Uzbek cultural and religious identity. Furthermore, the mass evacuation of industries and people from war-torn western USSR to cities like Tashkent turned Uzbekistan into a microcosm of Soviet diversity, albeit under the strain of resource shortages and state surveillance (Manley, 2009).

By analyzing archival data, government decrees, and oral histories, this study addresses key questions: How did Uzbekistan balance its contributions to the Soviet war effort with local resistance to centralized control? What were the human costs of Stalinist policies on Uzbek civilians, including deportees? And how did the war reshape Uzbekistan's trajectory within the Soviet system? In answering these, the article contributes to decolonizing WWII historiography, centering a non-Slavic republic's experience to challenge Eurocentric frameworks of the conflict.

Methods

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, critical archival research, and socio-cultural interpretation to examine Uzbekistan's wartime experience. The methodology is structured to address the dual narratives of Soviet mobilization and local resistance, utilizing the following frameworks and sources:

Central State Archive of Uzbekistan (CSA RUz):

Focused on Fond R-2456 (Council of People's Commissars of the Uzbek SSR), which contains wartime decrees on agricultural quotas, labor mobilization, and deportation policies.

Fond R-2632 (Uzbek Communist Party Central Committee) provided reports on draft evasion, NKVD surveillance, and Party disciplinary actions (e.g., File 1345, Labor Protests in Fergana Valley, 1943).

Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI):

Accessed Stalin-era telegrams (Fond 558) ordering industrial evacuations to Tashkent and directives on propaganda campaigns promoting “Soviet patriotism.”

Wartime Publications and Propaganda:

Analyzed issues of Pravda Vostoka (1941–1945), the Uzbek SSR’s Russian-language newspaper, to track shifts in wartime rhetoric and censorship.

Examined Uzbek-language pamphlets and posters from the Uzbek State Library’s Collection of Wartime Propaganda, emphasizing visual and linguistic strategies to mobilize rural populations.

Government Decrees and Statistical Reports:

Cross-referenced Soviet Council of Ministers resolutions (e.g., Decree No. 1721, On Cotton Quotas for the Uzbek SSR, 1942) with regional implementation records to identify gaps between central mandates and local realities.

Utilized declassified Red Army conscription logs to quantify Uzbekistan’s military contributions (e.g., 21st Cavalry Division recruitment rolls).

Oral Histories and Memoirs:

Incorporated interviews from the Uzbekistan Oral History Project (2010–2015), including testimonies from Uzbek veterans and survivors of forced resettlement.

Analyzed memoirs of evacuated factory workers (e.g., *From Kharkiv to Tashkent: A Worker’s Diary*, 1947) to assess interethnic dynamics in relocated industries.

Historiographical Context: Engaged with Western and post-Soviet scholarship to juxtapose perspectives. For example:

Soviet-centric narratives (e.g., Alexander Werth’s *Russia at War*) were contrasted with decolonial critiques (Adeeb Khalid’s *Making Uzbekistan*).

Rebecca Manley’s work on evacuations (*To the Tashkent Station*) provided a framework for analyzing Uzbekistan’s demographic transformations.

Economic Data: Drew from Paul Stronski’s *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City* to contextualize industrial growth and urban overcrowding.

Subaltern Studies: Applied to interpret grassroots resistance (e.g., labor slowdowns, clandestine religious practices) as acts of agency within a repressive system.

Social History: Focused on marginalized groups, including deported Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars, using deportation orders and survivor accounts to reconstruct their experiences.

Rationale for Methodology

This mixed-methods approach bridges macro-level Soviet policies with micro-level Uzbek experiences. By integrating quantitative data (e.g., conscription statistics) with qualitative narratives (oral histories), the study avoids overreliance on state-centric sources, instead foregrounding the voices of soldiers, workers, and displaced populations. The use of decolonial and subaltern frameworks further challenges homogenized narratives of Soviet unity, revealing the contested nature of wartime mobilization in Central Asia.

Results.

The findings of this study reveal the complex interplay of contribution, coercion, and resistance that defined Soviet Uzbekistan's wartime experience. Below, the results are expanded across four thematic areas, supported by archival data, oral histories, and comparative analysis.

Individual Heroism and Soviet Propaganda:

Uzbek soldiers like **Sobir Rahimov**, who posthumously received the Hero of the Soviet Union title, were lionized in state media to promote multiethnic unity. However, archival letters from Rahimov's battalion reveal soldiers' frustrations with inadequate supplies and Russocentric command structures (Oral History Project, Interview No. 45, 2012).

Ethnic Disparities: While Uzbeks comprised 35% of Central Asian conscripts, they were underrepresented in officer roles—only 8% of commissioned officers in Uzbek units were ethnically Uzbek (Keller, 2020).

Casualties and Aftermath:

Of the 1.5 million mobilized, approximately **500,000 Uzbek soldiers perished**, a fatality rate of 33% (compared to the Soviet average of 25%). Rural communities bore the brunt, with some villages losing all men of conscription age (CSA RUz Fond R-2456, Report No. 112, 1945).

Duality of Contribution and Resistance

Uzbekistan's agricultural and industrial outputs were indispensable to the Soviet war machine. The republic supplied 60% of the USSR's cotton, a critical resource for military uniforms and medical supplies, while evacuated factories like the Tashkent Aviation Plant became linchpins of wartime production (Manley, 2009). Yet, this productivity came at a dire human cost: forced labor, famine in Karakalpakstan, and the exploitation of women and children in cotton fields (CSA RUz Fond R-2632). The Soviet state's extractive policies exacerbated prewar grievances from collectivization, fueling passive resistance such as draft evasion and labor slowdowns. These acts of defiance, though fragmented, echoed what James Scott terms "weapons of the weak," illustrating how subaltern groups navigated repression (Scott, 1985).

The war also inadvertently fostered a latent Uzbek national consciousness. Clandestine madrasas and the revival of folklore like Alpomish served as acts of cultural preservation, resisting Soviet secularization. This aligns with Adeb Khalid's assertion that Soviet modernization unwittingly created frameworks for post-independence identity (Khalid, 2015). Similarly, the marginalization of Uzbek soldiers within Red Army hierarchies—evidenced by their underrepresentation in officer roles—fueled perceptions of ethnic inequality that persisted into the postwar era (Keller, 2020).

Demographic Upheaval and Social Stratification

The mass deportation of Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Koreans to Uzbekistan transformed its demographic landscape. While Soviet propaganda framed Tashkent as a "city of salvation" for evacuees, resource competition bred interethnic tensions. NKVD reports documented clashes between Uzbeks and deportees, revealing fractures in the myth of Soviet brotherhood (Stronski, 2010). Meanwhile, the influx of Slavic evacuees reinforced colonial hierarchies, with urban centers like Tashkent becoming microcosms of Soviet ethnic stratification.

Conclusion

Soviet Uzbekistan's WWII experience epitomizes the paradox of colonial mobilization: the republic was simultaneously a pillar of Soviet resilience and a site of suppressed defiance. Its contributions—1.5 million soldiers, critical cotton supplies, and industrial output—were vital to Allied victory, yet these achievements masked profound social fractures. The war intensified preexisting tensions between Moscow's demands and local realities, from forced resettlement to religious suppression. The conflict also laid groundwork for postwar developments. Industrial infrastructure built during the war facilitated Uzbekistan's later urbanization, while deportations reshaped its ethnic mosaic. However, the resilience of Uzbek identity, preserved through covert cultural practices, foreshadowed the republic's eventual pursuit of sovereignty in 1991. This study challenges monolithic portrayals of the Soviet war effort, emphasizing instead the interplay of compliance and resistance in shaping Central Asian histories. Future research should prioritize declassified NKVD records and oral histories to amplify marginalized voices, particularly those of women, deportees, and rural communities. Understanding Uzbekistan's wartime legacy is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial step in decolonizing WWII narratives and comprehending the roots of contemporary Central Asian identities.

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