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Some Aspects of Regional Development in Soviet Central Asia

Unlike Professor Hooson's "area" scholar who is inclined to view things solely from the national or metropolitan standpoint, those of us concerned with only one part of a country are in little danger of overlooking regional problems. On the contrary, we are much more likely to become too wrapped up in them, or rather in those of our particular parish. It is salutary, therefore, to be reminded that there are other parts of the country with their own very different and often competing demands, and Professor Hooson's cogently argued division of the Soviet Union into three primary "worlds" and ten geographical subregions transcending existing administrative boundaries is very helpful in providing a new perspective.

It seems to me, however, that the statement in his introductory paragraph that "at least as important in the long run as conflict of ethnic or religious origin is the increasingly familiar deepening of regional inequalities in the richer nations" requires some modification. For although regional inequalities are always likely to lead to certain strains and tensions, in a state where the population is homogeneous they are not very likely to lead to any kind of separatist movement, unless the state lacks territorial integrity. On the other hand, where ethnic and religious differences exist and have a territorial base, economic grievances can and do fuel potentially destructive nationalisms. But are they a *sine qua non* of the latter?

In the Soviet Union one would naturally expect any political problems arising out of regional inequalities to be greatest in the non-Russian republics, and any discussion of the allocation of resources between the republics must have an extra political dimension lacking in debates on whether or not Siberia should be given favored treatment vis-à-vis European Russia. In other words, like it or not, the planners have to take more account of republican than RSFSR oblast frontiers, however irrational the former may be. But of course that is not to say that in discussing the question of regional development the individual republics have to be considered in isolation, since they may well share common problems and characteristics. This is obviously the case with the Central Asian republics grouped together in Professor Hooson's sub-region 10. And the inclusion with them of southern Kazakhstan is easily justified, although the Kazakhs themselves would hardly take kindly to having the other half of their republic treated as part of Siberia. As Professor Hooson

indicates, one of the most crucial questions here in the 1970s is likely to be what to do with the region's rapidly growing labor resources, and I think it is therefore worth going into in some detail. But a brief look first at the record of development to date will help to set the scene and suggest which other factors are likely to play an important role in development policy in the future.

In addition to considerations of a straightforward economic nature, matters of ideology, the Soviet Union's obsession with autarky, and the accident of war have all played a part in the development of the Central Asian republics since the Revolution. The ideological commitment to bring the peoples of the eastern borderlands up to the level of central Russia was most clearly enunciated in the well-known resolutions on the national question adopted by the Tenth and Twelfth Party Congresses in 1921 and 1923. It probably is safe to say that, as a result of this commitment, more capital was invested in the Central Asian republics than could have been justified on the grounds of economic rationality alone. This has been particularly true in fields such as education and medical services. As regards industrialization, the ideological factor was most in evidence in the first two five-year plans and found its most symbolic expression in the construction of a huge cotton textile mill in Tashkent in obedience to Lenin's directive to take industry to the sources of raw material. But in the face of the extreme backwardness of the region and the great scarcity of capital, the amount of industrialization actually achieved before the war was little more than token.

A greater fillip was given to industrialization by the wartime evacuation of plants from western Russia (which also accounts for the presence of certain unlikely factories in Central Asia today). As for the "autarky factor," this was most obvious in the investment in irrigation and the favorable treatment accorded to the Central Asian cotton grower compared with the Russian grain grower, which stemmed not so much from a desire to improve the Central Asian peasant's lot vis-à-vis his Russian brother as to achieve self-sufficiency in cotton. (It is somewhat ironic that as a result of this policy the Soviet Union is now a major cotton exporter—Uzbekistan comes third after the RSFSR and the Ukraine for the value of its exports, 80 percent of which consists of cotton fiber¹—but sometimes has to import grain.)

In the immediate postwar years Moscow's efforts had to be concentrated mainly on the reconstruction of the devastated areas in European Russia. It is true that the need for a shift of industry to the east remained a priority in the plans of the 1940s and 1950s, but this concerned primarily Siberia and Kazakhstan, and no special provision was made for accelerating development

1. Ch. A. Abutalipov, *Pod leninskim znamenem druzhby i mira* (Tashkent, 1970), pp. 116, 129.

in the Central Asian republics. Indeed, theoretically there were no longer any grounds for singling out Central Asia for special treatment, since it had become axiomatic that the economic and cultural inequality of the eastern borderlands had been eradicated with the completion of the Second Five-Year Plan. However, by the end of the 1950s it was realized that, in spite of continued economic progress, particular attention would have to be paid once again to the less-developed republics, and the 1959–65 and 1966–70 plans accordingly set industrial growth rates for the Central Asian and some other republics which were higher than, or at least as high as, the average for the country as a whole. As there could be no going back on the thesis that the economic and cultural backwardness of the national borderlands had been overcome, the new policy was termed “the equalization [*vyravniwanie*] of the levels of economic and cultural development of the union republics.” But there was not only a difference in terminology. For while the accelerated development of the eastern borderlands envisaged in the prewar five-year plans was probably motivated by ideological considerations pure and simple, the *vyravniwanie* policy of the 1960s almost certainly owed a lot to pressures from the republics themselves (and probably not only those of Central Asia)—pressures ironically generated by the nationalities policy and its promises of genuine economic and cultural equality.

The Central Asian republics are only too well aware that today they remain less developed than the other union republics, and parallels with the developing countries of the Third World are not hard to find. Thus their indigenous peoples are still predominantly rural, agriculture plays a larger part in their economies than in the Soviet Union as a whole, and mineral extraction and sectors linked to cotton play a dominant role in industry. Also, in three of the four republics, industrial production has not grown as fast since 1913 as in the USSR generally, despite its low original base (the exception is Kirgizia, where industry was virtually nonexistent in 1913). However, the disturbing feature of the 1960s was that although the area enjoyed a respectable rate of economic growth, the development gap between the Central Asian, and also Azerbaijan and Kazakh, republics and the rest of the country expressed in national income produced per capita increased throughout the decade.² (In 1965 the per capita national income in the Central Asian republics was 62 percent of the all-union average,³ but the disparity would have been

2. This can be seen by comparing the growth of national income produced (1960 = 100), given in the Soviet statistical yearbook, with population growth.

3. A. I. Vedishchev, “Soizmerenie urovnei khoziaistvennogo razvitiia ekonomicheskikh raionov SSSR,” *Ekonomicheskie problemy razmeshcheniia proizvoditel'nykh sil SSSR* (Moscow, 1969), p. 82.

much less if calculated on the basis of labor resources rather than population.) In fact the gap was almost bound to grow to some extent, since the industrial and other growth targets of the 1959–65 and 1966–70 plans were not high enough to compensate for the exceptional population increase. But the situation was aggravated by the fact that only Tadzhikistan reached its industrial growth target in the 1959–65 plan and only Kirgizia in the 1966–70 plan, and in some instances the shortfall was as great as 40 percent.

Perhaps because progress toward *vyravnivanie* was so uneven in the 1960s, the word itself seems to be less in vogue of late, but the party is still committed in principle to faster rates of growth in the less developed republics, and all the Central Asian republics except Tadzhikistan have above-average industrial growth targets in the current Five-Year Plan. The only reason for Tadzhikistan sharing with Estonia the lowest target of all the republics seems to be the serious delays in the construction of the Nurek hydroelectric scheme, which is to supply electricity for the important South Tadzhikistan “territorial production complex.” In contrast, the exceptionally high target for Turkmenistan is apparently due primarily to European Russia’s need for Turkmen natural gas.

The variations in the current plan figures for industrial growth in the Central Asian republics show that development in the future, as in the past, will inevitably be governed to a large extent by economic factors such as the area’s natural resources and current potential, and also the needs of the rest of the country. It also has to be remembered that however persuasive or even compelling the noneconomic reasons are for investing more in Central Asia, problems such as higher construction costs, lower productivity, and the shortage of skilled labor (without the compensation of lower wages which the Third World can offer to Western investors) are powerful disincentives for the branch ministries who have usually had the final say in the location of new undertakings up to now. Nonetheless certain political, strategic, and social considerations are bound to play a part in channeling some capital to Central Asia which might have been employed more profitably elsewhere. First, Moscow may be inclined to go some of the way to meet the republics’ demands in the hope of preventing economic grievances from feeding national resentments. In the last decade or so the republics have been much more ready to stand up openly for what they conceive to be their rights. Thus they have made frequent complaints about the inadequate development of the textile industry, which meets less than half their own needs—a situation that is, they hint, in glaring contradiction to Lenin’s commitment to bring industry closer to the sources of raw material and its market. Similarly a discussion in Tashkent over whether Uzbekistan or European Russia should have priority in the consumption of Uzbek natural gas has been described as having “frankly nationalist

overtones.”⁴ And the Uzbeks are almost certain to resent not having any say in the disposal of their rich gold deposits, particularly since the secrecy over gold production figures is bound to make them exaggerate the quantity of gold that is being mined. The second consideration is that the proximity of China is also likely to make the central government want to keep the Central Asians happy. The third and most immediate and tangible argument for extra investment is to provide employment for the region's growing labor resources.

The two main factors responsible for Central Asia being a labor surplus area are the increasing mechanization of agriculture, which probably first made itself felt at the end of the 1950s, and the postwar population explosion, which began to affect the labor market in the 1960s. The largest manpower reserves are in the rural areas in the old oasis regions like the Fergana valley, but there are also considerable reserves in the small and medium-size older towns with largely indigenous populations. At the same time, however, because of the native peoples' relatively low mobility and lack of industrial skills, there are acute shortages of labor in the large cities and new industrial towns, on various construction projects, and in the sovkhozes on newly reclaimed land. As a result there is a continuing influx, from outside the region, of Russians and others who find local living and working conditions, except in Turkmenistan, more attractive than in Siberia and the other labor-deficit areas from which they often come. It is indicative of the shortage of skilled labor that special inducements or wage coefficients are still being offered for working in certain parts of Central Asia.

Some idea of the employment problem to be tackled in the 1970s can be gained from the fact that in the ten-year period 1970–80, as a result of natural increase alone, the number of the able-bodied (in the Soviet definition this means men between the ages of sixteen and fifty-nine and women between the ages of sixteen and fifty-four) in the population of the four Central Asian republics will grow by some 50 percent or more. In Uzbekistan, for instance, taking no account of any possible migration, the number of able-bodied persons will rise from 5,044,000 in 1970 to roughly 7,700,000 in 1980. These figures compare with a growth of approximately a quarter in the eleven years 1959–70, from both natural increase and migration.⁵

The latest census results claim that the proportion of the able-bodied who were employed or were students went up between 1959 and 1970 and was not far short of the all-union average, but this conceals the fact that on many farms there has been a reduction in the number of days worked by

4. Violet Conolly, *Beyond the Urals* (London, New York, and Toronto, 1967), p. 123.

5. 1970 census results published in *Pravda Vostoka*, Apr. 28, 1971, *Sovetskaia Kirgizia*, May 5, 1971, *Kommunist Tadzhikistana*, May 6, 1971, and *Turkmenskaia iskra*, July 11, 1971.

kolkhozniks, particularly women, and that the farms are often at a loss to know how to employ all the labor they have. In Andizhan Oblast, for instance, instead of the norm of one man per ten hectares of arable land, there are ten and often twenty.⁶ The press also leaves no doubt about the considerable reserves of labor that have built up in the small and medium-size old towns as a result of the high rate of natural population increase and the failure to develop these towns industrially. For example, half of the able-bodied population in Arys and a third in Turkestan and Chelkar were said to be not working in the public sector in 1968.⁷ This situation has arisen there because, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, ministries have preferred to locate factories in the larger towns where there is a developed construction industry and a skilled labor force. The consequence in Central Asia is that manufacturing industry is largely concentrated in the capitals of the four republics, with Frunze, the most extreme case, accounting for just over half of Kirgizia's total industrial output.⁸ (The one-sided development of heavy industry in some of the new industrial towns, such as Chirchik, Angren, and Almalyk, has also led to a shortage of local employment for women, but in this case mainly Russian.)

From the beginning the party pledged itself as part of its nationalities policy not only to develop industry in the backward eastern borderlands but also to create native industrial proletariats. As was true of the first half of this pledge, the most concerted efforts to fulfill the second half were made in the prewar period, particularly during the First Five-Year Plan, when the proportion of natives in the industrial labor force increased rapidly. Since then the absolute number of workers of the Central Asian nationalities has risen greatly, but it has never matched their share of the population. Moreover, the Central Asians tend to be particularly badly represented in certain sectors such as the machine-building, chemical, and gas industries, and in construction. Over the years the party has frequently called for an increase in the native element in the industrial labor force, but with little avail, although it is described as "a very important political and social task."

There are two main reasons for this. First, the development of industry has outstripped the training of local workers. When a new industry or a project such as a hydroelectric power station is involved, the organization may well have to bring in a certain number of its own skilled workers. But

6. B. Rakhimov, "Problemy, zamysly, sversheniia," *Ekonomika i zhizn'*, 1972, no. 2, p. 44.

7. P. Novikov, "Problemy malykh gorodov," *Partiinaiia zhizn' Kazakhstana*, 1968, no. 8, pp. 63-64.

8. A. I. Imshenetsky, "Nekotorye aspekty razvitiia i razmeshcheniia promyshlennosti Sredneaziatskogo ekonomicheskogo raiona," *Problemy razvitiia vostochnykh raionov SSSR* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 152-53.

it may also choose to bring in many more of its own workers than are absolutely necessary rather than lose time training indigenous workers on the spot, particularly since there may be a shortage of qualified instructors who speak the vernacular. The temptation to recruit any skilled Russian laborers who come to the region of their own accord in preference to the unskilled Central Asians is also very great. Thus the result is that any major new industrial development almost inevitably leads to an influx of Russians. This can be seen clearly in the latest census results, which show that between 1959 and 1970 the Russian population of Bukhara Oblast (exploitation of natural gas and gold deposits) increased by 60,000 or 124 percent, of Kzyl-Orda Oblast (the Tiuratam space complex) by 42,000 or 83 percent, and of Guriev Oblast (Mangyshlak oil) by 77,000 or 128 percent, compared with an average increase in the Russian population in the country as a whole of only 13 percent. Moreover, the increase in the number of Ukrainians in these oblasts over the same period was proportionately even more dramatic.⁹

Second, although it is true that many undertakings do not make as much effort as they might to recruit and train local labor, it is also true that the Central Asians have shown themselves somewhat reluctant to leave the rural areas for the republican capitals, the new industrial towns, and the big construction projects, where most of the jobs are. What deters them is that these towns and construction sites are largely Russian or at least Russianized and therefore present an alien ethnic environment. Moreover, their knowledge of Russian, the language often used in the factory, is generally very poor. At the 1970 census only some 15 to 20 percent of Uzbeks, Tadzhiks, Turkmens, and Kirghiz claimed to have a good command of the language.¹⁰

But the Central Asian *kolkhoznik* is not only reluctant to go to the Russianized towns. He is also unwilling on the whole to move to the new cotton and rice-growing *sovkhozes*, although the wages are appreciably higher there. Here, lack of housing is partly to blame. Another factor is that the new lands need mainly skilled agricultural workers such as machine operators, of whom there is a shortage even in labor surplus areas. As a result, at least in the early 1960s, some 20 to 40 percent of the labor force in some *sovkhozes* in the Hungry Steppe, the lower reaches of the Amu Darya, and the Karakum Canal area came from outside Central Asia.¹¹

But probably the main reason the Central Asian *kolkhozniks* have not left the *kishlak* in greater numbers before now is that they are still able to

9. *Pravda Vostoka*, Apr. 28, 1971, *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, June 9, 1971, and *Pravda*, Apr. 17, 1971.

10. *Pravda*, Apr. 17, 1971.

11. M. K. Karakhanov, "Nekotorye problemy rasseleniia i ratsional'nogo ispol'zovaniia resursov gustonaselennykh oazisov Srednei Azii," *Voprosy fizicheskoi i ekonomicheskoi geografii Uzbekistana* (Tashkent, 1967), p. 167.

make a living there. Those released from work on the kolkhoz can usually do quite well out of their private plots. There has also been a certain amount of resistance to mechanization on the kolkhozes themselves, and since wage rates have risen faster than productivity, the wages of the individual kolkhoznik may not have dropped very much, even if he does work fewer days. But with mechanization remaining the order of the day (however irrational in the circumstances), with more and more youngsters reaching working age, and with wages bound to drop even if yields rise, it is doubtful that this situation can continue much longer.

On paper the obvious solution to Central Asia's surplus manpower is to encourage it to go to labor-deficit areas such as Siberia. But, understandably in view of what has been said above, this is not being strongly urged at present. The authorities may also realize that the Central Asians would be likely to end up in the less skilled jobs, with detrimental effects on what we should call race relations. Moreover, a concerted campaign to persuade Central Asians to go to Siberia would hardly be well received by them if Russian immigration to their republics, which is already resented, was still continuing on any scale.

What then of the employment opportunities in Central Asia itself? The new sovkhozes set up as a result of various major irrigation schemes now under way will be able to take a certain amount of the surplus agricultural labor. But if the Hungry Steppe is anything to go by, they will be highly mechanized and there will be a limit to the numbers they can absorb. An expansion of fruit and vegetable growing, which are labor-intensive operations, is also envisaged. The service industries also offer employment openings, since they are relatively underdeveloped at present, particularly in the rural areas. As for industry, the area has adequate energy resources, and there is scope for the expansion of the machine-building, chemical, food, and light industries. But care will have to be taken to ensure that industry is more evenly distributed within the republics, and efforts made to see that an undue proportion of the new jobs created are not taken by immigrants from outside the region, particularly in areas of new development.

A much greater dispersal of light industry in Uzbekistan is already being achieved under a crash program (approved at the end of 1968) for the development of this industry in the republic. The program is clearly designed not so much to meet Uzbek claims to a greater share of the country's textile industry as to help mop up existing labor surpluses, and all but two of the forty-six new undertakings scheduled to be built in 1969–75 are to be located outside Tashkent Oblast in small and medium-size towns and large raion centers, where they can also absorb labor from the surrounding countryside.¹² But if it is

12. N. Nishanov, "Perspektivy razvitiia legkoi promyshlennosti," *Ekonomika i zhizn'*, 1969, no. 4, pp. 38–43.

relatively easy to site light and food industry undertakings where they can be reasonably sure of attracting indigenous labor, it is much more difficult to ensure that a majority of the new jobs in some other sectors of industry will be taken up by local people. Great efforts are being made to improve the teaching of Russian in rural schools, and there are signs that the population is becoming more mobile. In November 1971 the Uzbek Central Committee and Council of Ministers also announced that the number of vocational training schools in the republic was to be doubled by 1975 to overcome the shortage of skilled workers.¹³ But whether ministries and individual undertakings, under pressure to fulfill their plans, can be dissuaded from continuing to transfer workers from outside and giving preference to Russian and other immigrant labor is a moot point. That the party ultimately wants to keep more Russians from moving to Central Asia may also be doubted, particularly since the Central Asians increased their share of the population at the expense of the Russians in all the republics in the intercensal period, and their rate of natural increase remains high.

On the evidence available (and for a noneconomist) it is difficult to say whether sufficient steps are being taken to deal adequately with the problem of Central Asia's labor surpluses, but to judge from remarks in the local press it would seem that those on the spot do not always think so. There also remains the question whether steps should be taken to slow down the rate of population growth in the Central Asian republics. It is true that the rate of natural increase declined during the 1960s, but to some extent this was inevitable with the reduction in the number of women reaching childbearing age because of the low wartime birth rate. The recent census also showed that the average age at marriage is higher than formerly in the Central Asian republics. More education and the rising living standards might be expected to favor a drop in the birth rate, but it may not drop fast enough of its own accord to reduce the employment problem to manageable proportions in the near future. Although suggestions have been made in the Soviet press that the Central Asians should be encouraged to have fewer children, an official campaign—however justified on economic grounds—would surely give rise to accusations of racial discrimination when at the same time Russians are being encouraged to have larger families.

13. *Pravda Vostoka*, Nov. 21, 1971.