



PROJECT MUSE®

A Controversial Dam in Stalinist Central Asia: Rivalry and
"Fraternal Cooperation" on the Syr Darya

Flora Roberts

Ab Imperio, 2/2018, pp. 117-143 (Article)

Published by Ab Imperio

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2018.0030>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/703015>

Flora ROBERTS

**A CONTROVERSIAL DAM
IN STALINIST CENTRAL ASIA:
RIVALRY AND “FRATERNAL COOPERATION”
ON THE SYR DARYA***

In April, a little way off from Leninobod, on the banks of the river Syr [Darya], a splendid celebration [*tūi*] was held, the like of which no one there had ever seen before. Dear guests from near and far came to the celebration, and joyfully joined this day of festivities alongside the Tajiks. From Uzbekistan, our neighbor on the right side, the best people came... engineers, technicians, party leaders, they gladdened us by paying us honor.¹

In April 1956, a new dam was inaugurated on the Syr Darya, in the Tajik Ferghana Valley, with much pomp and orchestrated gaiety, as the quote above suggests. The dam at Kairakkum created a large reservoir of the same name, which was celebrated in the All-Union press as bringing a new lease on life to an area that had apparently been a “desert” – offering new

* The author acknowledges the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ Samad Ghani. *Dar Sohili Dar'oi Sir* (On the banks of the river Syr) // *Aiemi Mo* (Our Epoch). Stalinobod, 1958. P. 135.

prospects for industry, cotton irrigation, fishing, and even tourism on the banks of Tajikistan's artificial "sea" (Tadzhikskoe more). A decade earlier however, Bobojon Ghafurov, first secretary of the Tajik Communist Party, whom one might have expected to be a key proponent of so high profile an investment in his republic, had instead lobbied against the planned dam.² Ghafurov's hostility to the project sheds light on competing visions for the development of the region, held by central All-Union institutions and by the leaders of the republics that shared the fertile and densely populated Ferghana Valley.

During the 1940s, when the Kairakkum dam was under discussion, the Tajik leadership interpreted the project as advancing the economic interests of their Uzbek neighbors at the expense of their own. Kazakh representatives on the planning commission also opposed it. The Tajiks had had similar reservations about the first dam on the Syr Darya, at Farhad – the point at which the Ferghana Valley gives way to the Mirzacho'l steppe to the west. The location of both these dams – which were scheduled to flood Tajik territory – was considered injurious to their own development plans for the region. For the small, predominantly mountainous Tajik SSR, whose economy was nonetheless heavily dependent on cotton, cultivated in the scarce valleys, the promise of hydropower and the modernization that would ensue apparently failed to outweigh the fear of losing arable land. Were these suspicions and fears justified? The gulf between public rhetoric and private negotiations, a common theme in large infrastructure projects the world over, sheds light on some specificities of Central Asian visions and strategies for development within the Soviet context.

I interpret Ghafurov's hostility to the dam project in the context of the center's goals and expectations for the cotton-growing periphery and that of Tajikistan's relations with its more powerful neighbor, the Uzbek SSR. Ghafurov's objections reflected his understanding of the center's priorities for his region at the time, as he understood that those priorities would not be diverted from agriculture to industry in the short term. Thus it was reason-

² In the mid-1940s, concerted opposition by officials to the construction of dams appears to have been rare: the earliest well-documented example of opposition to a *Gidroproekt* plan is the campaign to preserve Lake Baikal, which began in 1958. Nicholas Breyfogle. *At the Watershed: 1958 and the Beginnings of Lake Baikal Environmentalism* // *Slavonic & East European Review*. 2015. Vol. 93. No. 1. Pp. 147–180; Paul Josephson. *New Atlantis Revisited: Akademgorodok, the Siberian City of Science*. Princeton, 1996; Douglas Weiner. *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Berkeley, 1999. Pp. 355–373.

able for Ghafurov to fear that the losses to the agricultural productivity of the northern Leninabad region would not be adequately offset by investment in industry, or by any recalibration of the center's expectations regarding cotton deliveries from Tajikistan. Further, the vantage point of this case study suggests that Uzbekistan enjoyed a stronger negotiating position with Moscow and All-Union institutions than did Tajikistan, which contributed to the sense of grievance nursed by Tajikistan vis-à-vis their neighbor.

Artemy Kalinovsky has convincingly shown how under Khrushchev, a new generation of Central Asian leaders, promoted to more prominent positions than any had held under Stalin, received a more sympathetic ear for their visions for the development of their home regions than formerly. Kalinovsky sees Stalin's death as ushering in a new phase of Soviet investment in the development of its own Asian periphery.³ As a dam project designed and approved during Stalin's lifetime, but completed and inaugurated under Khrushchev, Kairakkum makes an interesting test case for the degree of agency enjoyed by Central Asian actors in this transitional phase. As we will see, the advice of certain All-Union institutions – most notably Gosplan, which refused for several years to approve the Kairakkum project – was overridden in order for what might be termed “Uzbek interests” to carry the day. If this view can be substantiated, it could then be seen as a late Stalinist story of Central Asian actors securing investment for the biggest hydropower plant in the region despite a tepid reception from Gosplan. The foundations for one of Central Asia's most ambitious development projects, then, were laid while the *Vozhd'* yet lived, during as well as after World War II.

I focus on the arguments in favor of or against damming the Syr Darya River at specific locations, to shed light on the expectations of interested actors in furthering the region's development, and on different understandings of what that development should look like. The two dam projects on the Syr Darya planned in the 1940s, at Farhad and Kairakkum, linked the fates of two distinct landscapes: that of the densely populated Ferghana Valley, traversed from east to west by the river and crossed by a network of irrigation channels, and the 10,000 square kilometer plain of Mirzacho'l to the west, characterized by low precipitation and a harsh continental climate and inhabited predominantly by transhumant pastoralists before conquest by the

³ Artemy M. Kalinovsky. *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan*. Ithaca, 2018; Artemy M. Kalinovsky. *Not Some British Colony in Africa: The Politics of Decolonization and Modernization in Soviet Central Asia, 1955–1964* // *Ab Imperio*. 2013. Vol. 14. No. 2. Pp. 191–222.

Russians.⁴ Soviet rule brought an increasing focus on cotton cultivation at the expense of food crops in the Ferghana Valley, despite dissenting voices from among the local Tajik and Uzbek leaders,⁵ while Mirzachoʻl became after World War II the “largest single area irrigation project in the Soviet Union.”⁶ The discussion surrounding the dam project illuminates competing priorities held within and between ministries and agencies, of opening up new land for agriculture versus improving yields, damming for hydropower versus irrigation, and investing in industry rather than agriculture.

“Friendship of Peoples” and Fraternal Rivalry

The dam on the Syr Darya was inaugurated during Ghafurov’s last month in high political office, April 1956, but he did not attend the ceremony that took place a stone’s throw from his home village. The Tajik leadership was represented instead by Tursunboi Uljaboev, chair of the Tajik Council of Ministers (hereafter SovMin), whose Uzbek counterpart, Nuritdin Muhitdinov, was also present. They were joined by the leading Tajik and Uzbek writers, at a ceremony in which poetry and speeches were declaimed, while selected workers received diplomas and “expensive gifts.”⁷ This symmetry in participation between delegates from the Uzbek and the Tajik republics might seem odd for a project located squarely within Tajik territory, whose potential to benefit Tajik agriculture and Tajik industry was repeatedly emphasized by the press at the time.

Whatever tensions might bubble under the surface, the rhetorical model used to frame official relations between the republics of the Union was “druzhba narodov” (“Friendship of Peoples”). Two decrees assigning the name “Friendship of Peoples” to the Kairakkum power plant were issued on the same day in Dushanbe and in Tashkent.⁸ Then, following the flooding of Tajik territory caused by the dam, the Uzbeks responded with a “fraternal

⁴ Christine Bichsel. From Dry Hell to Blossoming Garden: Metaphors and Poetry in Soviet Irrigation Literature on the Hungry Steppe, 1950 to 1980 // *Water History*. 2017. Vol. 9. No. 3. Pp. 337–359.

⁵ Flora J. Roberts. *Old Elites under Communism: Soviet Rule in Leninobod* / Ph.D. Dissertation; University of Chicago, 2016.

⁶ Bichsel. From Dry Hell to Blossoming Garden. P. 339.

⁷ Trudovaia pobeda stroitelei Kairak-kumskoi GES // *Pravda*. 1956. April 10. P. 2.

⁸ Identically worded decrees “On awarding the name ‘Friendship of Peoples’ to the Kairakkum power plant” were issued on April 20, 1956, by both the Uzbek and the Tajik SSRs’ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. See Kairakkumskaia GES “Druzhba Narodov”: Ukazatel’ literatury. Dushanbe, 1962. P. 9.

gift” of land.⁹ The border between the two republics was redrawn in 1958, when Uzbekistan transferred a portion of the Hungry Steppe, adjacent to the western – Tajik end of the Ferghana Valley – to its neighboring republic. While propaganda described this gesture as a spontaneous “gift” from the Uzbek SSR to its Tajik “brothers,” the history of acrimonious border disputes between the neighboring republics invites skepticism.¹⁰

The rationale underlying this carefully choreographed display of the “Friendship of Peoples” motif, underlined by the speeches made at the inauguration ceremony, lay in the long and fraught design and approval history of this project, for which the initial impetus and concerted lobbying had in fact come from Uzbekistan. “Friendship of Peoples” was a cloak clumsily placed over this newest theater for competition between the rival republics, in a zero-sum game for control of territory, natural resources, and human population. Despite deep cultural similarities and thoroughly mingled, nationally indifferent populations, tensions between leaders of these republics had repeatedly flared during the protracted negotiations to create national republican boundaries in the 1920s.¹¹ As a result of that territorial division, all major population centers with significant persophone populations, and the most arable land, had been assigned to the Uzbek SSR, leaving the Tajik SSR to be carved out, like Eve from the spare rib of Adam, from the mountainous eastward reaches of the former Emirate of Bukhara.¹²

The national delimitation process shared the waters of the Syr Darya unevenly between four of the Soviet republics. The river, formed by the confluence of the Naryn and the Karasuu (Qoradarya), both of which originate in Kyrgyz territory, flows for over 2,200 kilometers in a generally northwestern direction. The Syr Darya crosses into Uzbek territory at Uchqo’rg’on, and traverses the Ferghana Valley from east to west, looping continuously, and frequently splitting into several ribbons. After a stretch marking the border

⁹ Here, and throughout, I use both “the Uzbeks” and “the Tajiks” as a shorthand for the government and leaders of the respective SSRs. No reference to the ethnicity or linguistic and cultural background of the actors is intended or implied. In ethnic terms, the populations of the two republics can be considered thoroughly commingled, and there are significant minorities of Uzbek speakers in Tajikistan today, just as there are of Tajik speakers in Uzbekistan.

¹⁰ Paul Bergne. *The Birth of Tajikistan*. London, 2007; Adeb Khalid. *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*. Ithaca, 2015.

¹¹ Francine Hirsch. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca, 2005; Rahim Masov. *Istoriia topornogo razdeleniia*. Dushanbe, 1991.

¹² Adeb Khalid. *National Consolidation as Soviet Work: The Origins of Uzbekistan // Ab Imperio*. 2016. Vol. 17. No. 4. Pp. 185–205.

between the Uzbek and the Tajik SSRs, the Syr Darya enters Tajikistan a scant four miles from the eastern end of the artificial reservoir formed by the dam at Kairakkum. Thus, the reservoir is wholly on Tajik territory, and beyond the dam to the west, the Syr Darya continues its westward course through the city of Leninobod (today Khujand), before crossing once again into Uzbek territory. The stretch of the Syr Darya on Tajik territory is 180 kilometers, a small fraction (12 percent) of the river's total length.¹³ The Syr Darya then turns north, crossing another section of the Uzbek SSR until it reaches the Kazakh border. Then as now, the Syr Darya ends its long journey across Kazakh territory by pouring into the Aral Sea, although the volume of water reaching the inland sea declined sharply over the course of the twentieth century.



Fig. 1. Map of the Syr Darya Basin (Wikimedia, created from DEMIS Mapserver).

Before the outbreak of World War II, the primary focus of state-led interactions with the waters of the Syr Darya was irrigation. Studies of the river basin, focused on its potential to expand irrigated agriculture into the steppe, had been produced regularly in the 1920s and 1930s,¹⁴ although the

¹³ Reki i ozera Tadzhiqistana. Dushanbe, 2003. Accessed online at http://tajikwater.net/docs/rivers_and_lakes_080625.pdf. Last visit of this and other Internet resources: August 10, 2018.

¹⁴ Russian State Archive of the Economy (hereafter RGAE). F. 8378. Op. 1. D. 22 (1929–1932). File contains meetings and resolutions on improving the management of the “land and water resources of the Syr Darya River basin.”

first serious efforts to boost farming in the Hungry Steppe date to the tsarist period.¹⁵ In the Ferghana Valley, several irrigation channels had been built in the last years before the war, most notably the Great Ferghana Canal, completed in 1939.¹⁶ Soon after the completion of that project, Gosplan published a comprehensive plan for the use of the waters of the Syr Darya, in which one of the major new areas to be opened up to intensive irrigation was Mirzacho'l, or the Hungry Steppe. On the eve of the war, irrigation, rather than hydropower or industrialization, was still the focus in development plans for Central Asia emanating from Gosplan.

The sprawling 1940 report envisioned a series of interventions along the course of the river, and both Farhad and Kairakkum are discussed as potential locations for dams.¹⁷ Both these locations would permit the construction of channels bringing water from the head of the dam to irrigate fields in Mirzacho'l.¹⁸ As it turned out however, in the sudden rush to approve the Farhad project, irrigation would be a secondary concern, and the initiative, when it came, did not come from Gosplan.

Building at Farhad

In June 1941, when Hitler's armies invaded the USSR, the vast country was convulsed by frantic efforts to evacuate thousands of industrial enterprises eastward to safety. Prospects for industry in the Uzbek Republic improved markedly, thanks to the sudden evacuations of factories and personnel away from the Western front.¹⁹ The Tashkent region was allocated the lion's share of heavy industry evacuations, which vastly increased electricity needs in the area. Factories newly resettled in the Tashkent region included the Chkalov aircraft factory, installed by 1942, which required ready access to steel as well as electricity.²⁰ The first secretary of the Uzbek Communist

¹⁵ Julia Obertreis. *Imperial Desert Dreams: Cotton Growing and Irrigation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, 1860s–1991*. Göttingen, 2017.

¹⁶ Maya Peterson. *Technologies of Rule: Empire, Water, and the Modernization of Central Asia, 1867–1941* / Ph.D. Dissertation; Harvard University, 2011. Pp. 501–518.

¹⁷ RGAE. F. 4372 Gosplan. Op. 38. D. 1797–1834.

¹⁸ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 38. D. 1830. "Tekhniko-ekonomicheskii doklad, predstavlennyi Sredneaziatskim otdeleniem Gidroenergoproekta po voprosu energo-irrigatsionnogo regulirovaniia basseina reki Syr-Dar'ia, tekst i chertezhi," 1940.

¹⁹ Natalie Belsky. *Encounters in the East: Evacuees in the Soviet Hinterland during the Second World War* / Ph.D. Dissertation; University of Chicago, 2014; Rebecca Manley. *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War*. New York, 2009.

²⁰ Richard Pomfret. *The Economies of Central Asia*. Princeton, 1995. P. 69.

Party, Usman Yusupov, personally headed a newly established taskforce on the electrification of Uzbekistan.²¹ It was the Great Patriotic War that suddenly made industrialization and electrification a pressing strategic concern in Central Asia, and the Uzbek leadership was poised to reap the benefits.

It was thus because of, rather than in spite of, the outbreak of hostilities, that certain dam construction projects tabled before 1941 were swiftly given the green light. While the flagship hydropower plant at Kuibyshev, approved in 1939, was shelved until 1950,²² in November 1942 the State Defense Committee ordered construction of a dam and hydroelectric station at Farhad, on the Tajik-Uzbek border at the western end of the Ferghana Valley.²³ That same month, November 1942, a cascade of dams for electricity generation purposes was also approved close to Tashkent, the Lower Bozsuu dam series.²⁴ A Crimean Tatar, deported to Farhad as a child, later recalled, “The war was going on, and electricity was needed for the construction of the only metallurgical plant in Central Asia, as well as for the rare metals being excavated in neighboring Tajikistan.” At Farhad, this rather peripheral area of the Soviet Union, a hydropower plant would be built that would be, as *Pravda vostoka* (Truth of the East) declared, “one of the most powerful in the Soviet Union.”²⁵

Although the Farhad power plant was a project of the Uzbek SSR, the land on which it stood had been leased from the Tajik SSR, and it was mostly Tajik land that was flooded by the dam. The planned flooding had apparently not been shared in a timely manner with the Tajik authorities, who later claimed to have been blindsided by the projected loss of agricultural land in the Ferghana Valley expected to result from the project.²⁶ Nonetheless, in 1944, the Tajik Sovnarkom and its Uzbek counterpart worked out a deal

²¹ V. Tyrtysnikov. OAO UzbekGidroEnergoKurilish 1932–2007. Company brochure dated 2007. P. 13.

²² Paul Josephson. The Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, and the East European Experience // Doubravka Olšáková (Ed.). In the Name of the Great Work: Stalin’s Plan for the Transformation of Nature and Its Impact in Eastern Europe. New York, 2016. P. 3.

²³ State Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter GARF). F. P5446 “Sovet Ministrov SSSR”. Op. 48a. D. 1578. L. 86.

²⁴ Tyrtysnikov. OAO UzbekGidroEnergoKurilish 1932–2007. P. 13.

²⁵ Narod stroit Farkhadskuii GES // Pravda Vostoka. 1942. December 3. P. 1. See also GARF. F. 8300. Op. 14. D. 508; Viktor A. Dukhovny, Joop de Schutter. Water in Central Asia: Past, Present and Future. Boca Raton, 2011. P. 138.

²⁶ Telegram dated February 4, 1945, sent by Kurbanov and Protopopov in Stalinabad to Molotov, All-Union Sovnarkom, and Malenkov, CC of the CPSU // GARF. F. P7523. Op. 65. D. 172. L. 11–12.

whereby the just under 6,000 hectares of Tajik farmland scheduled to be submerged by the dam would be compensated by some 18,000 hectares of land belonging to a nearby Uzbek state farm, which would be transferred permanently to the Tajik SSR. Having reached an apparently mutually satisfactory agreement, the Tajik authorities submitted a request to Kalinin and the All-Union SovMin to ratify the slight border change, attaching the two resolutions recently passed by the Tajik and Uzbek councils.²⁷

If the Tajiks expected the All-Union SovMin to rubber stamp the agreement hammered out with the Uzbeks, they were swiftly disappointed, as objections to this transfer of land were raised from several quarters, including the All-Union agency responsible for state farms, and that responsible for the nearby steel plant in Bekabad. Both these agencies objected that the interests of their sector would be harmed by the land transfers, and proposed different solutions to the problem of the Tajik farmland to be flooded. There was no need, they argued, for the borders to change: Tajik collective farmers affected by flooding could be relocated elsewhere within Tajikistan, or transferred to neighboring farms in Uzbekistan, which need not change hands. This latter proposal gained traction, particularly once the Tajiks objected that the farmers in question had categorically rejected offers to be transferred to the Vakhsh Valley, several hundred miles to the south.²⁸

The Uzbek authorities, evidently realizing that their offer of compensation had been needlessly generous, hastened to give their assurances that they would gladly assume the costs of relocating all the Tajik farmers to be resettled, to any collective farm in Uzbekistan. The war had brought about an acute labor shortage, making the Uzbek authorities eager to take on additional laborers, while the Tajik authorities were reluctant to lose manpower. The Tajik request to alter the interrepublican border in their favor was denied by the All-Union SovMin, and the loss of farmland caused by the creation of the Farhad reservoir – orchards, cotton fields, and vineyards – was not formally compensated. From a regional economic perspective, the construction of the dam at Farhad yielded electricity vital to the industries in Bekabad and the Tashkent region, and a channel capable of bringing water to previously untilled fields of the Hungry Steppe / Mirzacho'l, at the cost of the loss of some 6,000 hectares of agricultural land in Tajikistan. To the leadership of the Tajik SSR, the negative outcome was the most salient.

²⁷ Khodataistvo SNK Tadjh. SSR ob izmenenii granits mezhdu Tadjh. i Uzb. SSR vvidu stroitel'stva Farkhadskoi GES // GARF. F. P7523. Op. 65. D. 172. L. 1.

²⁸ GARF. F. P7523. Op. 65. D. 172. L. 8.

Despite the leaders of two neighboring republics having worked out a mutually satisfactory compromise, which honored shared concerns about population transfers and the scarcity of agricultural land, their signed resolutions were overridden at the behest of sectoral All-Union institutions concerned about the economic repercussions of altering the border between republics. Sharing the Syr Darya River basin threw a harsh light on the limitations of republican sovereignty, and on the hierarchy within different sectors of the economy, reinforced and upheld by the center as necessary. The Friendship of Peoples trope had some heavy lifting to do.

Planning a Dam at Kairakkum

Before the war and wartime industrial evacuations temporarily derailed the economic priorities for the region, the goal in harnessing the waters of the Syr Darya and expanding irrigation into the Hungry Steppe was to expand cotton cultivation, and eventually reach cotton independence for the USSR, an ever-receding milestone. With those goals in mind, the experts dispatched in 1940 to assess the feasibility of expanding irrigation into the Hungry Steppe had weighed up different options, but concluded that a dam on the Syr Darya, creating a reservoir 16 kilometers upstream from the Northern Tajik city of Leninabad was the best option – preferable, in terms of this goal, to a dam at Farhad.²⁹ This reservoir, assigned the toponym Kairakkum, would be contained by mountain ranges on the right and left banks of the river, and would reach different sizes depending on the height of the dam.

Guided by different priorities and varying levels of interest in minimizing the downsides of a large dam in a populated area, various stakeholders proposed strikingly different sizes for a potential reservoir at Kairakkum. Gosplan had calculated that a reservoir with a capacity of up to 3 billion cubic meters would permit the irrigation of “up to 220,000 additional hectares of land in the mid- and lower reaches of the Syr Darya basin.”³⁰ Two Tashkent-based institutions meanwhile had proposed far larger reservoirs: Sazvodproiz, the Central Asian office for the research and design of irriga-

²⁹ Prilozhenie No. 2 k tekhniko-ekonomicheskomu dokladu po Farkhatskoi GES v kompleksnom reshenii s problemoi orosheniia Golodnoi Stepi. K voprosu orosheniia Golodnoi Stepi kanalom ot KairakKumskogo vodokhranilishcha // RGAE. F. 4372 Gosudarstvennyi planovyi komitet Soveta Ministrov SSSR (hereafter Gosplan). Op. 38 (1940). D. 1833. L. 4.

³⁰ RGAE. F.4372 Gosplan. Op. 46 (1946). D. 665 Zakliucheniiia Gosplana SSSR po porucheniu pravitel'stva o Kairakkumskom vodokhranilishche i materialy k zakliucheniiu. L.12.

tion systems and water facilities, proposed a reservoir of 5.8 billion cubic meters, while Saogidep, the Central Asian branch of *Gidroenergoproekt*, an even larger size of 9.4 billion cubic meters.³¹ These larger sizes reflect the major interest of the Uzbek leadership and allied institutions in the reservoir at Kairakkum: using it to regulate the flow of water to the hydropower station downstream at Farhad.

When the Kairakkum site was first proposed as a dam location in 1940, the emphasis was primarily on the potential for irrigation, and secondarily on electricity production. Among several possible locations for such a reservoir, the Gosplan committee recommended Kairakkum, because the location permitted lower construction costs and the use of simpler techniques – relative to the Farhad location – and because it was claimed to have the potential to generate “550 million kilowatts of electricity per year (*sic*: 550 megawatts).”³² This was a characteristically hyperbolic projection: the enormous and iconic Dnepr powerplant, the largest in Europe when it opened, produced 560 megawatts,³³ while the average for Kairakkum would eventually settle at around 126 megawatts. To get a sense of the bounty these figures represent, in 1945 the city of Leninabad – the closest urban center to Kairakkum – had very modest electricity requirements of only 500 kilowatts a day. Even these paltry needs could not be met during the war years, as in 1945 the city generator was in need of repairs and running well below capacity, producing only 150–170 kilowatts.³⁴ Unlike their Uzbek counterparts, the local Tajik leadership struggled to grasp the implications of being granted the capacity to produce electricity on such a scale. Meanwhile, construction of a dam and hydropower plant went ahead at Farhad.

In early 1944, with the dam at Farhad under construction, a new committee of scientific and technical experts was appointed by Gosplan to assess the potential of the Syr Darya basin as a whole, and issue recommendations to expand irrigation in the lower reaches of the river (in the Kazakh and Uzbek portions, in other words).³⁵ The Gosplan committee included representatives

³¹ RGAE. F. 4372 Gosplan. Op. 38 (1940). D. 1833. L. 4.

³² RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 38. D. 1833. L. 3; Op. 46. D. 665. L. 12.

³³ Paul Josephson. *Stalin’s Water Workers and Their Heritage: Industrialising Nature in Russia, 1950–Present* // *Global Environment*. 2017. Vol. 10. No. 1. P. 176.

³⁴ Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereafter RGASPI). F. 17. Op. 45. D. 1673: Stenographic report of the 15th plenum of the Leninobod oblast party committee, held February 1-2, 1945.

³⁵ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 2.

from each of the republics that shared the river basin: the rivals.³⁶ One of the Kazakh representatives was quick to express the “categorical opposition” of the Kazakh Sovnarkom to the proposed dam at Kairakkum, on Tajik territory. The Tajik representatives also declared themselves opposed. The controversy concerned the location of the planned dam, which should be determined in accordance with its primary purpose – which was, indeed, the root of the disagreement between the rivals.

Although dams are often multifunctional, the location, and the resulting technical specifications, determine and limit the dam’s usefulness under various headings: electricity generation potential, storage capacity, flood prevention, and the viability and cost of getting water from reservoir to fields. From the Kazakh point of view, the main goal of damming the Syr Darya continued to be irrigation rather than energy production. Thus, Kazakh representatives lobbied for a dam and reservoir located much farther downstream, at Upper Chardara, in a location designed to irrigate Kazakh fields. They were concerned that a reservoir at Kairakkum would replace (or at least, significantly delay) another reservoir farther downstream, and increase the volume of water upstream retained and diverted elsewhere – an additional demerit.³⁷ Furthermore, the Kazakhs charged that the primary purpose of the Kairakkum location was not irrigation at all, but water storage: objecting that “this project is needed now in connection with the hydroelectric station at Farkhad, to improve production during wintertime.”³⁸ They were correct: although the Uzbek representatives gestured toward irrigation goals, their primary interest was in the further industrialization of the Tashkent region.

The Tajik representatives, Majitov and Ahmedov, meanwhile objected in a letter sent to Gosplan on April 11, 1944, that a reservoir at Kairakkum would damage the Leninabad region, then the agricultural heartland of the Tajik Republic, and also requested that alternative sites be considered instead. The Tajik representatives feared that a dam upstream would raise the level of the groundwater in Leninabad, the republic’s second city, and lead to the loss of the “most culturally significant” districts in the region.³⁹

³⁶ The English word “rival” derives from the Latin “*rivalis*,” meaning one who shares the same stream as another.

³⁷ RGAE. F. 4372. Gosplan USSR. Op. 46. D. 665 Zakliucheniiia Gosplana SSSR po porucheniiu pravitel’sstva o Kairakkumskom vodokhranilishche i materialy k zakliucheniiu. L. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 2. The objections attributed to the Tajik representatives were cited in letter sent by the vice chairman of Gosplan, Demidov, to the Gosplan chairman, N. A. Voznesenskii, in February 1946.

Thus by 1944, two of the three Union republics likely to be affected directly by the construction of a dam at Kairakkum had expressed their firm opposition to the project in writing. Despite these objections, in December 1945, Uzbek Sovnarkom requested that the All-Union Sovnarkom commit to building a reservoir at Kairakkum within the coming few years.⁴⁰ Earlier that year, the engineer Kalachev had presented the plans for a hydroelectric station – not only a reservoir – at Kairakkum elaborated by Saogidep in the specialist journal *Gidrotekhnicheskoe stroitel'stvo*.⁴¹ Although installing a hydropower station at Kairakkum could be seen as a bid to make the project more attractive to its Tajik counterparts, Uzbek Sovnarkom in fact offered two arguments in favor of the Kairakkum project: the need to improve the functioning of the Farhad power plant, and the prospect of irrigating a significant amount of land in the Hungry Steppe. The relative importance of these two goals to the Uzbek leadership would most eloquently be illustrated by the prompt “gift” of a large chunk of newly irrigated Hungry Steppe from the Uzbek to the Tajik SSR, soon after the dam at Kairakkum was completed.

The response of the All-Union Sovnarkom to the Uzbek leadership's request was an equivocal attempt to appease different interest groups. Two resolutions were passed on February 2, 1946: the first established a commission, headed by V. V. Kosov, vice chair of the Ministry of Technical Cultures (in other words, industrial crops), to (re)assess the Uzbek republic's request to build a reservoir at Kairakkum. The second resolution proposed that the Uzbek SSR focus instead on crop rotation on fallow land, and convert more land currently sown with grain over to cotton. It was estimated that the Uzbek SSR would be able to expand the area under cultivation by as much as 900,000 hectares, before the need for large-scale infrastructure would arise. Notably, these suggestions all failed to address the need for a reservoir upstream of the Farhad power plant. Gosplan's reservations were thus all the more easily set aside.⁴²

The new commission headed by Kosov was based in Tashkent, a physical vantage point that may have predetermined the outcome of its deliberations. Kosov's commission took a week, in June 1946, to assess the advisability of constructing a reservoir at Kairakkum from the physical vantage point

⁴⁰ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 3.

⁴¹ N. S. Kalachev. Kairak-Kumskaia GES na r. Syr-Dar'e // *Gidrotekhnicheskoe stroitel'stvo*. 1945. No. 7-8. Pp. 3–6. Cited in Gosudarstvennaia respublikanskaia biblioteka Tadjikskoi SSR im. Firdousi, Leninabadaskaia mezhraionnaia biblioteka. Kairakkumskaia GES “Druzhba narodov:” ukazatel' literatury. Dushanbe, 1962. P. 18.

⁴² RGAE. F. 4372 Gosplan. Op. 46. D. 665. L.1–3.

of the capital of the Uzbek republic, which supported the project. Tashkent was, at the time, the main urban center of Central Asia, but nevertheless one cannot help wondering how the outcome of the commission's inquiries might have been affected had they been based instead in Leninabad, the city closest to the planned reservoir, in the Tajik republic, whose territory would be submerged by the reservoir.

Kosov's commission concluded that the construction of a reservoir at Kairakkum was "expedient" – however, somewhat bizarrely, "four out of the seven members did not agree with the findings of the commission, and submitted their own [divergent] opinions."⁴³ Faced with these inconclusive results, the All-Union SovMin issued a new resolution in November, appointing a "council of scientific and technical expertise" under Gosplan to review the findings of Kosov's commission.⁴⁴ Gosplan had already examined the proposals to exploit for developing the Syr Darya basin in 1944, and found that additional survey work was needed. When presented with the findings of Kosov's committee, Gosplan's scientific experts complained that as none of the additional research required in 1944 had been carried out, the renewed request to approve a reservoir at Kairakkum was "based on insufficient material ..., and brings nothing new to change the conclusions presented earlier."⁴⁵ A stalemate loomed.

The Gosplan experts emphasized that the choice of location for the first reservoir in the Syr Darya basin was an important one, which should seek to balance the needs of both irrigation and electricity generation. Thus, Gosplan in 1946 remained opposed to development at Kairakkum, while the commission established by the All-Union Sovnarkom had come out in favor, albeit with a majority of dissenting (or partially dissenting) members. Meanwhile, the position of the Tajik leadership had also crystallized.

Tajik Objections and the Naukat Counterproposal

On June 26, 1946, Mamadali Kurbanov, chairman of the Tajik SovMin, submitted to Gosplan a new and more comprehensive list of arguments against the Kairakkum project, championed by his Uzbek counterparts.⁴⁶ It

⁴³ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 4.

⁴⁴ Order signed by Voznesenskii, vice chairman of the All-Union SovMin, N.12628, dated October 4, 1946 // RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 1081. L. 57.

⁴⁵ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 5.

⁴⁶ RGAE. F. 4372 Gosplan. Op. 46. D. 1081: Ekspertiza materialov po stroitel'stvu KairakKumskogo vodokhranilishcha. L. 44–52.

was also Kurbanov who, less than two years earlier, had spearheaded the failed campaign to adjust the Tajik-Uzbek border to compensate for the flooding at Farhad, and he did not let this new threat to agricultural productivity in the north of the country go unchallenged.

To bolster its position, Tajik SovMin had set up its own “brigade of specialists” to assess the economic damage expected to result from the Kairakkum dam project. The cost of moving elsewhere the collective farms whose land would be submerged was calculated on the basis of similar costs already incurred due to the Farhad project. Some 39 kilometers of railroad track, as well as telephone lines, roads, 22 schools, and 5 medical points would also need to be dismantled and rebuilt. More concerning still was the projected loss of 2,600 hectares of forest, “the only source of timber for the oblast.” The estimate of the total damage, 183 million rubles, was two-thirds higher (66 percent) than the estimate of damages cited by Saogidep.⁴⁷

In reviewing materials submitted to Gosplan on an alternative reservoir location, farther upstream at Naukat, in the Uzbek Ferghana Valley, Kurbanov had noticed that Sazvodproiz had posited a reservoir in that location of only 1.3 billion cubic meters, causing the Naukat variant to be dismissed out of hand.⁴⁸ Presenting Saogidep and Sazvodproiz as allies in lobbying for the Kairakkum location, Kurbanov continues: “Representatives of the same Saogidep and Sazvodproiz, instead of an objective assessment, when comparing these two locations, showed every tendency to reduce the importance of Naukat, which, as it turned out, can be and is a serious competitor to Kairakkum.”⁴⁹

Perhaps predictably, when the Tajik-appointed specialists compared the locations, they found Naukat preferable in every respect: the possibility existed to generate equivalent amounts of electricity by means of a dam of the same height, it was more useful for irrigation as the dead storage volume was lower,⁵⁰ and the quality of land that would be flooded here was considered inferior to land at the Kairakkum location. The representatives of Saogidep and Sazvodproiz, however, had demonstrated their partiality by refusing even to visit the Naukat location.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid. L. 44.

⁴⁸ Ibid. L. 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid. L. 48.

⁵⁰ Dead storage refers to the volume of water stored below the invert of the lowest outlet and that, therefore, cannot readily be withdrawn from the reservoir. Glossary of the United States Society on Dams // <https://www.usstdams.org/resource-center/glossary/>.

⁵¹ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46 (1946). D. 1081. L. 47–49.

In perhaps the most damning criticism of the merits of Kairakkum as a multifunctional dam, Kurbanov pointed out that the site made no sense as an irrigation solution for the lower reaches of the Syr Darya, as those months in which the reservoir would have to retain water for electricity generation purposes were the same (May to June) in which water was needed for the rice fields on the lower reaches of the river. On behalf of the Tajik SovMin, Kurbanov insisted that alternative locations for reservoirs on Uzbek territory, including Naukat, be given due consideration.⁵² Like the Kazakh representatives, Kurbanov had made some valid points, but none of Kairakkum's opponents had been able to grasp that irrigation came a distant second to the industry-related needs of the Farhad powerplant for the project's proponents. The Kazakh and Tajik continued focus on irrigation made it harder to forestall the project's approval, and neither side offered any alternative solution to the need to regulate flow of water to Farhad plant, which powered the newly evacuated industries in the Tashkent region.

Although, as an opponent of the Kairakkum proposal, Mamadali Kurbanov found himself pitted against the Uzbek leadership, and the Tashkent-based Saogidep and Sazvodproiz, he hardly fit the mold of a Tajik nationalist. Kurbanov, born close to Osh, a Ferghana Valley city later assigned to the Kyrgyz SSR, served in the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek SSRs in the course of his career, which was relatively uncommon. Having begun his career as a miner in the Kyrgyz ASSR, he served at the helm of the Tajik SovMin for almost nine years, before suffering a clear demotion in 1946, when he was moved to a position as vice chair of the Ferghana province executive committee (Uzbek SSR), and then on to the Osh province executive committee. In fact, registering his opposition to the Kairakkum project appears to have been one of his last acts in office, as his successor, Jabbor Rasulov, had been installed as chairman of the Tajik SovMin by the end of summer 1946.⁵³

⁵² RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 1081. L. 48.

⁵³ Jabbor Rasulov // Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia. 3d ed. Vol. 21. Moscow, 1975. See also RGASPI F. 17. Op. 22. D. 2415: Stenographic report of the 6th Congress of the Tajik Communist Party, held March 13–17, 1940. In Kurbanov's speech (L. 337 and ff.), he extols the strides the republic has taken in irrigation, thanks both to the munificence of Soviet power, credited with investing 70 million rubles in irrigation in the Tajik republic alone in the preceding three years, and to the enthusiasm of the Tajik workforce, which carried out most of the digging work by hand.

Ghafurov's Appeal

Over that same summer, the first secretary of the Tajik Communist Party was also replaced, and the position was awarded to Bobojon Ghafurov. This was a significant milestone for the young republic: with the exception of a brief, unfortunate interlude at the height of the Stalinist purges,⁵⁴ never before had the number one post been occupied by an ethnic Tajik. Previous incumbents had been Azeri, Latvian, Armenian, and Russian, all with scant ties to the region. Ghafurov's chairmanship signaled a sea change in two respects: henceforth, all first secretaries would be local men, and he would last a full decade in this position, longer than any of his predecessors. Four out of five of his predecessors as first secretary had been purged, and three shot, during the Stalinist purges of 1936–1938. This context is important to bear in mind when assessing Ghafurov's response to the Kairakkum project: within the previous decade, expression of dissent, or even allegations of suspected, covert dissent from Party goals and policies, had proved deadly to many of his colleagues.

For biographical reasons, too, Bobojon Ghafurov was likely to take a keen interest in the Kairakkum project: his native village, Isfisor, was scarcely 7 kilometers away from the settlement of Kairakkum, and only a little farther from Leninabad, the region's main city. Before joining the Central Committee of the Tajik Communist Party, Ghafurov had worked as a journalist, and his keen interest in local history would lead him to undertake a history dissertation in 1949 – rather unusually, he pursued his studies concomitantly with his duties as first secretary. His commitment to researching and promoting the cultural heritage of the Tajik people informed his response to the planned development in his native region. In 1956 he would abandon politics altogether for academia, accepting an offer to head the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. His native district would look very different by then.⁵⁵

Ghafurov intervened in the ongoing controversy over the Kairakkum project in late 1946, only a few months after his promotion to first secretary, by means of an eloquent and strongly worded letter to Lavrentiy Beria, then

⁵⁴ The first ethnic Tajik first secretary of the Tajik Communist Party, Urumboi Ashurov, lasted less than nine months in his position, before being arrested and shot in 1937.

⁵⁵ Eden Naby. *Bobodzhon Gharufovich Ghafurov, 1908–1977* // *Slavic Review*. 1978. Vol. 37. Pp. 283–285. On Ghafurov's career at the Academy of Sciences, see Masha Kirasirova. "Sons of Muslims" in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–1962 // *Ab Imperio*. 2011. Vol. 12. No. 4. Pp. 106–132.

deputy chairman of the All-Union SovMin, and one of the most powerful men in Stalin's circle. Ghafurov's letter was cosigned by Jabbor Rasulov, the chair of the Tajik Sovnarkom who had replaced Mamadali Kurbanov: he was also a northern Tajik from the outskirts of Leninabad, and a close ally. Ghafurov's goal was to refute the suitability of Kairakkum as a location, but like the project's other opponents, he too identified irrigation as the main issue affecting the future development of the republics of Central Asia.

Like the Kazakh representatives,⁵⁶ Ghafurov offered several reasons for doubting that this particular location for a reservoir made sense in terms of irrigation. Gosplan had already stated that there was no current need for irrigation reservoirs on the Syr Darya, and when the time came, high-altitude reservoirs should be preferred to reservoirs built in the valley, as these have greater potential for electricity generation, avoid the high water losses through evaporation seen at lower altitude (40–50 percent), and entail lesser losses of farmland and lesser disruption to human settlements.⁵⁷ If the main goal were indeed to increase the availability of irrigated land, then why not build a reservoir at Upper-Chardara – as the Kazakhs requested – where a dam would not “cause any damage to a single one of the Central Asian republics?”⁵⁸ Ghafurov, like Kurbanov urged the alternative location of Naukat, in Uzbek Ferghana, but had nothing to say on whether that location would serve to regulate the flow of water to Farhad. Clearly, Ghafurov hoped above all to avoid further flooding of Tajik agricultural land.

Ghafurov's letter waxes lyrical extolling the virtues of the land that would be submerged by a reservoir at Kairakkum. His descriptions of the region are a world apart from the silent, empty desert conjured up by the 1950s media coverage at the time of the dam's inauguration.

Four districts of Leninabad oblast are included in the area scheduled to be flooded or waterlogged by the Kairakkum reservoir, an area of up to 69,500 hectares [Gosplan's own figure submitted in a February 1946 report was 55,700 hectares].⁵⁹... The orchards of the Leninabad region, with their world-famous varieties of apricots, vineyards, and mulberry groves will in large part be doomed.

Ghafurov goes on to enumerate the contributions made by the Leninabad region (oblast) as a whole to the economy of the republic: silkworms, dried

⁵⁶ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid. L. 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Letter from Demidov, vice chairman of Gosplan, to the Gosplan chairman N. A. Voznesenskii // RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 1.

fruit, and canned foods. He points out that the region produces one-third of the republic's cotton harvest and that yields are "the highest in all of Central Asia." It is understandable that Ghafurov would be unable, on short notice, to produce harvest figures pertaining to the specific fields slated for flooding, as the floodplain included parts of some collective farms while saving others, making exact yields hard to calculate. The effect, however, of veering between figures for the whole oblast and the affected territories, and of combining acreages of land lost to flooding with that likely to be compromised by rising groundwater levels, is to overstate the scale of the calamity hanging over his home region. "The total damage incurred by Leninabad region, were the reservoir to be constructed, on the basis of very incomplete data has been estimated as at least 183 million rubles."⁶⁰

It is hard to assess the plausibility of the claims made by Kurbanov, then echoed by Ghafurov, regarding the threat of flooding to the city of Leninabad, and potential damage to architecture caused by rising groundwater, as no sources are cited. Ghafurov's sensibilities as a historian, however, clearly shine through in his concern for the preservation of the historic city of Khujand – whose historical buildings and layout had already been, and would be, far more severely compromised by Soviet urban planning than by rising groundwater, but attachment to the past was surely not his only motivator.

As articulated in the letter, Ghafurov's vision for the future development of Leninabad province focused on building up the region's existing strengths in agriculture, rather than developing industry. Ghafurov advocated "further increasing the acreage under cotton, further developing horticulture and viticulture, as well as expanding the mulberry orchards on which the silk weaving industry in Tajikistan is based."⁶¹ Other than a passing reference to Leninabad's "light industry," which would also be affected by the reservoir, there is no discussion of the dam's effects on industry.

Ghafurov's appeal continues as follows:

It also bears pointing out that the Leninabad region has already lost at least 5,000 hectares of cotton fields and orchards, flooded as a result of the construction of Farkhad hydroelectric power station. With the construction of a reservoir at Kairakkum, the total losses from flooding in the region would amount to 15,000 hectares of beautiful, irrigated and cultivated land, sown with cotton, orchards, and vineyards. These

⁶⁰ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 14. These words were underlined in pencil by a reader in Moscow.

⁶¹ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 14.

losses will amount to 25 percent of the total area of irrigated land in Leninabad.⁶²

Despite some slippage in the figures offered to quantify the damage that would be caused to the Leninabad region by a dam at Kairakkum, the final figure stands out: one-quarter of the total irrigated land lost. Notably, Ghafurov's arguments against the dam are economic ones, and the feared damage is expressed in terms of rubles lost to the economy. There is no environmentalist language here, such as the one that would characterize the very public debate a decade later over plans to exploit the hydropower potential of Lake Baikal.⁶³ The "beauty" Ghafurov attributes to the land to be submerged appears to be entirely predicated on its ability to produce economically valuable crops – whether this stance reflected personal convictions or Ghafurov's understanding of his audience's priorities.

The letter ends with a request that the Kairakkum proposal be permanently shelved. This impassioned plea appears to have been read by Beria, but having done so, he forwarded it on to Andreev, the SovMin chairman, to deal with.⁶⁴ Faced with the inconclusive findings of Kosov's commission (which had been appointed by SovMin), and the angry dissensions of the Tajiks and Kazakhs, the ball passed once again back to Gosplan, whose panel of scientific and technical experts had previously cast doubt on the viability of the Kairakkum reservoir. They did so again, filing a new report in the summer of 1947. Once again, Gosplan declined to approve the Kairakkum reservoir proposal without a thorough analysis of the whole river basin, and charged the Ministry of Agriculture with preparing such a study, to be submitted to the All-Union SovMin by early 1948. If the Ministry of Agriculture ever did prepare this study, it was not included with the other archival documents pertaining to Kairakkum. With the ball back with the SovMin, it too charged a new commission, in the summer of 1949, to reconsider the plans to build a reservoir at Kairakkum in light of the Tajiks' objections. Ghafurov was included as a member of this committee – but I have hitherto been unable to unearth any further information on his involvement or response.⁶⁵

The top leadership of the Uzbek republic, however, persisted in advocating for a dam at Kairakkum, and took the initiative of setting up their own rival

⁶² Ibid. L. 15.

⁶³ Nicholas Breyfogle. *At the Watershed: 1958 and the Beginnings of Lake Baikal Environmentalism* // *Slavonic & East European Review*. 2015. Vol. 93. No. 1. Pp. 147–180.

⁶⁴ RGAE. F. 4372. Op. 46. D. 665. L. 11ob.

⁶⁵ GARF. F. P5446 (USSR SovMin). Op. 51. D. 900: "O stroitel'stve Kairak-Kumskoi gidroelektrostantsii na reke Syr-Dar'ia," August 1949.

delegation of experts to reevaluate the site in the summer of 1949. Members of this Uzbek-appointed delegation included the head of the construction project at Farhad (Farhadstroï), the head of Saogidep, and A. N. Askochenskii, vice chair of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, a founding member of Sazvodproiz, and a protégé of Uzbek Communist Party first secretary Usman Yusupov, who had made electrification a priority.⁶⁶ Bolstering its requests by reference to an All-Union Sovmin resolution adopted in July governing the construction of new hydropower stations in the *Uzbek SSR*,⁶⁷ the commission appointed by the Uzbek Communist Party recommended building a large reservoir (5.4 million cubic meters), larger than called for by the earlier, irrigation-focused studies.⁶⁸

After a hiatus of almost two years following Gosplan's final, apparently unanswered call for a further committee on Kairakkum in 1949, the All-Union SovMin issued a resolution in late July 1951 ordering all relevant ministries (including those of construction, transport, automotive industry, chemical industry, and so on) to cooperate on the construction of a hydroelectric station at Kairakkum.⁶⁹ That same month, in the words of a later press report, the suitably awestruck locals witnessed "a column of vehicles ... moving over the sand dunes of the Kairakkum steppe:"

And soon, people and materials began to arrive here from Moscow and Leningrad, from Ukraine and Belarus, from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and from dozens of industrial centers across the country. On September 1, a red flag was hoisted over the tent city: for here the construction of the largest hydroelectric power plant in Central Asia had begun.⁷⁰

The archives are as silent as the Soviet press on the question of what became of the deep hostility expressed by the Tajik leadership for this project. By 1952, the chair of the Tajik SovMin, and cosigner of Ghafurov's letter of protest, Rasulov, was dutifully signing off on orders relating to the Kairakkum construction project, while Ghafurov had apparently fallen silent.

⁶⁶ Boris Reskov and Gennadii Sedov. Usman Iusupov. Moscow, 1976.

⁶⁷ The decree referred to by the Uzbek leadership is No. 2855-1202 "On the Beginning of Construction in 1949 of New Hydropower Stations in the Uzbek SSR," USSR Soviet of Ministers, dated 3.7.1949, see GARF. F. P5446 (USSR SovMin). Op. 51. D. 900: O stroitel'stve Kairak-kumskoi gidroelektrostantsii na reke Syr-Dar'ia. L. 2

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ GARF. F. P5446. Op. 81. D. 4580, dated 4–30 July, 1951.

⁷⁰ A. Kruchinin. Flag nad pustyni // Pravda. 1972. March 24. P. 2.

In the end, the controversy over the location of the first major reservoir on the Syr Darya was not determined by any sophisticated analysis of the needs of the river basin as a whole. The reservoir at Kairakkum was approved, and built by Saogidep, for the sake of the Farhad project, which had already successfully bypassed the more cautious planning process requested by Gosplan during the war. To produce electricity reliably year-round, the hydropower plant at Farhad needed a large upstream reservoir to limit the seasonal fluctuations in water volume that affected the power station's turbines. In the opinions of relatively impartial as well as impassioned observers, both of these projects were implemented to benefit the interests of the Uzbek SSR, and ended up harming those of the Tajik republic, which lost territory – including thousands of hectares currently under cultivation – in both instances.

Empty Land No More

News coverage of the Kairakkum dam project in the 1950s emphasized the emptiness and low value of the land flooded by the reservoir. “Not long ago, this land was still empty. The drowsy silence was broken only by the rustle of dry grass and the cries of eagles. The Syr Darya carried its waters precipitously between sandy hills, from which the wind raised clouds of dust. ... Now, Kairakkum has a new lease of life.”⁷¹ The Syr Darya was dammed at the site of the future Kairakkum power plant on April 7, 1956, at 9:00 a.m., when a vast quantity of rocks and concrete pyramids were tipped into the river by dump trucks stationed along a temporary bridge. The reservoir eventually flooded a total of 52,000 hectares of land around Kairakkum (including between 11,000 and 15,000 hectares of irrigated land), together with a number of settlements. Some 1,639 households of collective farmers were evacuated from the floodplain.⁷² As with the other Tajik citizens – from Yaghnob, from Maschoh – more or less forcibly resettled during the postwar period, the state's expectation was that settlers displaced by the reservoir would populate – and staff – the new collective and state farms planned on “virgin lands” in Mirzacho'l. Many of those forced from their homes, however, resisted the state's plans for their resettlement.⁷³

⁷¹ Na beregakh Syr-Dar'i // *Izvestiia*. 1955. February 16. P. 2.

⁷² RGAE. F. 5675 Uchrezhdeniia po rukovodstvu pereseleniem v SSSR. Op. 1. D. 778: Otchet po komandirovke v Tadzhikskuiu SSR po proverke plana pereseleniia iz zony zatopeniia vodokhranilishchem Kairak-Kumskoi GES, February 10—March 18, 1954.

⁷³ Olivier Ferrando. *Soviet Populations Transfers and Interethnic Relations in Tajikistan: Assessing the Concept of Ethnicity* // John Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig (Eds.). *The Transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood*. London, 2013. Pp. 35–48;

Sometime before any reliable water supply had begun to reach the eastern reaches of Mirzacho'l, the Uzbek SSR made good on its commitment to transfer a land parcel to its brother republic, in compensation for the flooding caused by the dam at Kairakkum. The Supreme Soviet ratified the “fraternal gift” from the Uzbek to the Tajik SSR of the Hungry Steppe land parcel that would become Zafarobod district, an area of around 440 square kilometers,⁷⁴ which now presents as a spindly finger of Tajik territory extending into the Uzbek republic.⁷⁵ The new farms of Zafarobod were duly planted with cotton.⁷⁶ The Kairakkum site did acquire a hydropower plant, and a carpet factory, but overall, throughout the Soviet period, the economy of northern Tajikistan remained predominantly agricultural.

The Tajik and Uzbek SSRs both heavily depended on cotton – but the former more so. At times it seemed as though the Tajik republic’s value to the Union was most handily expressed through the number of raw cotton bales sent off to the factories of European Russia. Throughout the postwar period, cotton production loomed large in Tajik national identity, and no Tajik citizen was allowed to forget the crucial role that the crop played in the life of their nation. Mandatory corvée in the cotton fields – exacted of doctors and professors as well as school children – served as a reminder, as did the constant media coverage of the cotton sowing and harvesting campaigns, and the endlessly repeated cotton bud motifs on cast iron railings, teapots, bolts of silk, and crossword puzzles.⁷⁷ Cotton requires irrigation, and thus the issue of irrigation was bound up within the processes of Tajik national identity formation. This strong identification of cotton with the Tajik SSR’s

Botakoz Kassymbekova. *Humans as Territory: Forced Resettlement and the Making of Soviet Tajikistan, 1920–38* // *Central Asian Survey*. 2011. Vol. 30. No. 3–4. Pp. 349–370; Christian Teichmann. *Wildscapes in Ballyhooland: Shock Construction, Soviet Colonization, and Stalinist Governance* // *Cahiers du monde russe*. 2016. Vol. 57. No. 1. Pp. 221–254.

⁷⁴ Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR i materialy k nemu o chastichnom izmenenii granitzy mezhdU Uzbekskoi i Tadzhijskoi SSR. July 6, 1959 // GARF. F. R7523. Op. 78. D. 557.

⁷⁵ *Khorpushtak* (The Hedgehog), the mildly satirical Tajik language counterpart to *Krokodil*, illustrated the brotherly transfer of land from the Uzbek to the Tajik SSR on the cover of the January 1960 issue.

⁷⁶ Thomas Loy. *The Big Fraud – Recollecting the Resettlement of the Population of the Yaghnob Valley* // Christine Allison, Philip G. Kreyenbroek (Eds.). *Remembering the Past in Iranian Societies*. Wiesbaden, 2013. Pp. 141–164.

⁷⁷ Perusal of *Kommunist Tadzhiqistana*, or *Haqiqati Leninobod*, provides abundant evidence for the ubiquity of cotton visual motifs, and relentless coverage of the cotton sowing and harvesting campaigns, year after year.

value to and place within the USSR explains, I argue, the firm opposition to the dam and reservoir at Kairakkum expressed by the republic's leadership in 1946.

Although it may have taken courage in 1946, expressing opposition to a large-scale infrastructure project combining irrigation and electrification goals surely became far more politically hazardous after the watershed of 1948, when the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature was announced.⁷⁸ The nascent Cold War also played its part in spurring on the appetite for ambitious multifunctional dams, to rival those in the West. Stephen Brain has also pointed out the deep-rooted appeal of quenching the dry steppe, a promise Kairakkum would allegedly help to fulfill – how to argue against conquering the steppe, when it could be claimed, as O. Kliuchevskii had, “that the history of Russia *was* the history of the struggle between the Russian forest and the Asiatic steppe?”⁷⁹

Both neighboring Uzbekistan and All-Union institutions had priorities that easily trumped concerns over the size and quality of the Tajik cotton harvest. Providing electricity to newly evacuated factories and plants in the Tashkent region certainly trumped cotton from an All-Union standpoint, and did so with particular ease during World War II, when the Farhad project was approved. When the Farhad hydropower plant was found to need an upstream reservoir to deliver a stable supply of electricity, the Tajik leadership might be left to fret in vain over the loss of one-quarter of the Leninabad region's irrigated land, and the threat of flooding hanging over its major urban center. Thus, the Tajik republic gained the biggest reservoir and hydropower station in Central Asia at the time, against the expressed wishes of its leaders.

One might still wonder, as the Tajik leadership did in 1946, why alternate locations for an upstream reservoir – such as Naukat, which would have flooded Uzbek land – were dismissed out of hand. There is some evidence that Usman Yusupov, first secretary of the Uzbek SSR between 1937 and 1950, enjoyed Stalin's particular confidence – and Nicklas Norling has portrayed Stalin as preferring to side with Yusupov rather than the ethnic Russian second secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, and rather than

⁷⁸ I am indebted to Klaus Gestwa for our conversations on the significance of the 1948 watershed, in which he generously shared his expertise. Klaus Gestwa. *Die Stalinischen Grossbauten des Kommunismus: sowjetische Technik- und Umweltgeschichte, 1948–1967*. Oldenbourg, 2010.

⁷⁹ Stephen Brain. *The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature // Environmental History*. 2010. Vol. 15. No. 4. Pp. 670–700.

his own close colleagues.⁸⁰ In support of the claim that Yusupov's influence with Stalin was growing in the 1940s, Norling cites an exchange in 1943 in which Stalin sided with Yusupov over his offer to serve on a troika investigating corruption, against the opinion of Molotov and Mikoyan that Yusupov should not do so (although it may be that Stalin's opinion revealed more about his relationship with Molotov and Mikoyan).⁸¹ Earlier, Yusupov had been able to champion the Great Ferghana Canal project in 1939, disregarding the opposition of Molotov and also of his own second secretary.⁸² One does not have to imagine any genuine bond between Stalin and Yusupov to infer that the latter had more influence in Moscow in 1946, after more than a decade in his position, than the very newly promoted Bobojon Ghafurov.

Once the Tajik leadership's concerns were brushed aside, the "Tajik Sea" formed by the dam at Kairakkum eventually became an object of local pride and locus of regional identity. In this case, as in many others, dam construction was accompanied by a triumphalist discourse that underscored its contribution to the nation's prosperous future.⁸³ Making this case all the more remarkable is fact that Bobojon Ghafurov, author of the definitive nationalist history, *Tojikon* (The Tajiks),⁸⁴ one of a small handful of men who enjoy "father of the nation" status in contemporary Tajikistan, fought against the imposition of this project – a fact now seemingly forgotten.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Nicklas Norling. Party Problems and Factionalism in Soviet Uzbekistan: Evidence from the Communist Party Archives. Washington, DC, 2017. <http://isdpu.eu/content/uploads/2017/03/2017-norling-party-problems-factionalism-soviet-uzbekistan.pdf>.

⁸¹ Ibid. P. 50.

⁸² Ibid. Norling's evidence for Stalin's support of Yusupov against Molotov is: Yusupov to Shkiriatov, March 17, 1940 // Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI). F. 6. Op. 6. D. 662. L. 197–199; Protokol zasedaniia Biuro TsK UzSSR," August 20, 1940 // RGANI. F. 6. Op. 6. D. 662. L. 235.

⁸³ Filippo Menga. Building a Nation through a Dam: The Case of Rogun in Tajikistan // Nationalities Papers. 2015. Vol. 43. No. 3. Pp. 479–494.

⁸⁴ On the role of Ghafurov's *Tojikon* in shaping the national self-image of the Tajiks, and deepening tensions with their Uzbek neighbors, see Mohira Suyarkulova. Statehood as Dialogue: Conflicting Historical Narratives of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan // John Heathershaw and Edmund Herzig (Eds.). The Transformation of Tajikistan: The Sources of Statehood. London, 2013. Pp. 161–176.

⁸⁵ While Ghafurov's role in opposing the Kairakkum project seems to have been forgotten, recent news coverage of the reservoir occasionally refers to the fact that Tajik national interests were not paramount in the project's design. Kairullo Mirsaidov. Sostaianie Kairakkumskogo vodokhranilishcha vyzvaet trevogu ekspertov // Deutsche Welle. 2009. June 25. <https://bit.ly/2N7dJlQ>.

This is the story of a controversy over where a dam should be located, rather than whether a dam should be built – what, then, does it tell us about question of development, and what this meant to the Central Asian Soviet leaders of the late Stalin period? There are no grounds to think that the Tajik leadership of the 1940s opposed the industrial development of their republic, despite their objections to hosting the first major dam on the Syr Darya on Tajik territory. The arguments advanced by Ghafurov and his colleagues suggest rather skepticism in their region's ability to develop a solid industrial base – or that the necessary funds to do so would be forthcoming from Moscow – and to diversify the economy beyond a heavy reliance on raw cotton. Their disinclination or inability to engage seriously with the opportunities for economic development that a large dam might bring, owes more to their understanding of the irreplaceable role played by cotton in the Tajik economy than to any distrust of technology or concern for the environmental costs of dams. The outcome of the controversy over the dam's location seemed more likely to confirm than disrupt Tajikistan's lowly pecking order within the Union.

The emphasis on the value of the agricultural land to be sacrificed to the dam also betrayed a disconnect between Ghafurov's perspective and the implicit assumptions underlying the economic arguments in favor of the dam. The triumphant Prometheanism unleashed by the promulgation of Stalin's plan for the Transformation of Nature, in October 1948,⁸⁶ held that Soviet civilizational and technological advances had rendered land parcels quite interchangeable, just as units of human population were: provided a dam was designed to irrigate far more land than it flooded, the question of quality could be considered moot. The studies conducted on the irrigation needs of the Syr Darya basin all posit a basic equivalency between one hectare of irrigated land and another, and it is based on this assumed parity of value that the loss of irrigated land in the Ferghana Valley is offset by the planned acquisition of newly irrigated land in the Hungry Steppe.

The best explanation for the location chosen for the dam, however, was not the expansion of irrigation but the need to improve the efficiency of the hydropower station at Farhad, which powered industrial plants in the Tashkent region – these were the first industries to benefit from the dam built at Kairakkum. Notably, the potential benefits to industry of the Kairakkum dam and reservoir emphasized in the 1950s press coverage, are almost entirely absent from the planning documents of the 1940s. This post-Stalin interest in

⁸⁶ Brain. *The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature*. P. 673.

the industrial potential of the dam agrees with Kalinovsky's narrative of the Khrushchev-era focus on "developing" Central Asia, in the sense of bringing modernity, technological advances, and a "civilized" standard of living to the region. The needs of industry trumped those of agriculture, but perhaps more importantly, the drive for development for its own sake – which the large dam embodied – dwarfed any more specific production goals.

SUMMARY

The article tells the story of debates preceding the construction of the Kairakkum dam in Tajikistan in 1956. In the second half of the 1940s, Uzbek and Tajik party leaders competed over the location of the new hydropower plant. Neither side wanted it to be built in their own republic. Eventually, the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic became the construction site, which could be viewed as an indirect indicator of its subordinated position in the late Stalinist Soviet hierarchy compared to the Uzbek Republic, which became industrialized after massive wartime evacuation of factories from the European part of the country. Roberts restores the historical subjectivity of republican elites, who, even during high Stalinism, could object to Moscow's plans (with varying success) and advance their own visions of the region's development.

РЕЗЮМЕ

Статья рассказывает о перипетиях строительства Кайракумской ГЭС на Сырдарье, открытой в 1956 г. На этапе проектирования, во второй половине 1940-х, узбекское и таджикское руководство соперничали за влияние на решение о месте строительства плотины. Каждая сторона хотела, чтобы плотина была построена не на территории своей республики. В конце концов, Таджикская ССР проиграла, что может служить косвенным индикатором ее подчиненного места в советской позднесталинской системе по сравнению с Узбекской ССР, индустриализировавшейся в результате эвакуации предприятий военного времени. В статье Робертс возвращает историческую субъектность республиканским элитам, которые могли протестовать против планов Москвы (с переменным успехом) даже на пике сталинизма и отстаивать свое видение развития региона.