

## Legitimation through Self-Victimization

The Uzbek cotton affair and its repression narrative (1989-1991)

*La légitimation par l'auto-victimisation : « L'affaire du coton ouzbek » et ses récits (1989-1991)*

**Riccardo Mario Cucciolla**

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10133>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.10133

ISSN: 1777-5388

**Publisher**

Éditions de l'EHESS

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 October 2017

Number of pages: 639-668

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2698-4

ISSN: 1252-6576

**Electronic reference**

Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, "Legitimation through Self-Victimization", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 58/4 | 2017, Online since 01 October 2019, connection on 06 January 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10133> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.10133>

---

RICCARDO MARIO CUCCIOLLA

## LEGITIMATION THROUGH SELF-VICTIMIZATION

### The Uzbek cotton affair and its repression narrative (1989-1991)

There is an extensive literature on national identity and the process of national myth making in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup> These studies have deepened our understanding of the anthropological, sociological and political aspects of Uzbekistan's often painful transition from Soviet state to independent nation. Nevertheless, these

---

This article originated from a paper I prepared for the "16th Annual Conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS)" organized in Washington D.C. in October 2015. I want to thank Andrea Graziosi and Marco Buttino for their useful comments, Simon Paul Watmough for his edits, the journal's anonymous referees for their helpful criticisms and all the people I met during my researches in Uzbekistan for their time and support.

1. See: Laura Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks: From the Fourteenth Century to the Present. A Cultural History* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1990); Bakhtiar Babadzhanov, "Islam v Uzbekistane: ot repressii k bor'be identichnostei [Islam in Uzbekistan: from repression to the clash of identities]," in A. Kokoshin, ed., *Rossiiia-Sredniaia Aziia politika i Islam v XX - nachale XXI v.* [Russia-Central Asia. Politics and Islam in the XX and the early XXI century], (M., 2011); Donald S. Carlisle, "Uzbekistan and the Uzbeks," *Problems of Communism*, 1991; James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic's Road to Independence* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Peter Finke, *Variations on Uzbek Identity: Strategic Choices, Cognitive Schemas and Political Constraints in Identification Processes* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014); Gregory Gleason, "Uzbekistan: The Politics of National Independence," in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., *New States. New Politics. Building the Post-Soviet Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Marlene Laruelle, ed., *Constructing the Uzbek State: Narratives of Post-Soviet Years* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017); Maria Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London – New York: Routledge, 2007); Vitaly V. Naumki, *Radical Islam in Central Asia: Between Pen and Rifle* (Bolder: Bowman and Littlefield, 2005); Johan Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Grigol Ubiria, *Soviet Nation-Building in Central Asia: The Making of the Kazakh and Uzbek Nations* (London – New York: Routledge, 2015); Marco Buttino, *Samarcanda: Storie in Una Città Dal 1945 a Oggi* (Rome: Viella, 2015).

literatures have not adequately addressed the role of negative commemoration of the Soviet period within this process of crafting a new Uzbek national consciousness and significant historiographic lacunae therefore remain. The new field of identity and memory research<sup>2</sup> is essential to understand the role of historiography in the construction of a colonial trauma narrative in the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, including Uzbekistan, and in particular its function in grounding and legitimizing the new ideology of national independence (*Mustaqillik*). Sergey Abashin has observed how this new ideology was not built merely on the recovery of Uzbek tradition but was cast as a radical break with a pathological Soviet past, that blends “memory of the suffering caused by the colonial policies of the tsarist era with memory of Stalinist repressions and other hardships of the Soviet epoch to form one general sense of trauma.”<sup>3</sup> These intuitions prompted me to undertake a comprehensive investigation of post-Soviet historical memory in Uzbekistan and its role in the construction of a colonial trauma narrative through a particular case study: the Uzbek cotton affair. This long period of mass purges and criminal cases that overwhelmed the republican establishment in Uzbekistan in the '80s is a formative event in late-Soviet Uzbek history that drew extensive media coverage during perestroika. This investigation draws on unpublished primary sources, a study of contemporary Uzbek historiography, museology, literature and interviews in the field with the main actors responsible for defining the official historiography of Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was struck by how quickly this episode was forgotten in Russia only to re-emerge as a definitive event in Uzbekistan, remembered as one of the most tragic events in late Soviet history. Indeed, as we shall see, the Uzbek cotton affair has come to occupy a pivotal position in the official narrative of Uzbekistan's political, cultural, ideological and identity break with Russia/USSR, and in the ideological structuring and legitimation of the *Mustaqillik* concept.

This article therefore moves beyond the limits of the current literature to lay out in detail how the Uzbek cotton affair was narrated within the political arena to undergird the *Mustaqillik* ideology, most notably through the exploitation of national emotional levers that legitimized the steps taken by Uzbek political elites in the post-Soviet transition. These key moves that led to the definition and propagation of the *Mustaqillik* dialectic will therefore be outlined, showing how the Uzbek cotton affair was skillfully deployed to censure the Soviet regime and lay out a narrative of “victimhood” that both re-interpreted historical facts and rehabilitated the local victims and symbols of the affair. The political exploitation of memory in Uzbekistan—through history, museology and political discourse—offers the perfect case study of how a post-Soviet nation could assert its independent identity

---

2. A recent contribution comes from Timur Dadabaev, *Identity and Memory in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Uzbekistan's Soviet Past* (London – New York: Routledge, 2015).

3. Sergey Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later,” in Sophie Hohmann, Claire Mouradian, Silvia Serrano, and Julien Thorez, eds., *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Migration, Democratisation and Inequality in the Post-Soviet Era* (London – New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 87.

much as a newly post-colonial state might, drawing on simultaneously censorious and affirmative ideological narrative to strengthen—domestically and internationally—its political legitimacy.

### **Mustaqillik and the national myth making dialectic in Uzbekistan**

During the 1990s, the Soviet collapse was represented in discourse as a triumph of the nation state, national ideology and national identity. Out of this political earthquake emerged 15 newly-independent states in search of legitimation at both the domestic and international levels. Former Soviet Central Asian states thus began to forge (political) legitimizing national mythologies, rewriting the historical narrative—through a politically-directed historiography and new textbooks and museums—and reshaping collective memory to make a clear break with what was now being cast as an awkward past.

Unlike the struggles for national liberation and independence seen in decolonizing states elsewhere, the separation of the Central Asian republics from Russia was more or less unforeseen, an unavoidable consequence of a startling political collapse. Therefore, unlike the anti-colonial movements of Africa and Asia, no post-separation vision had yet been articulated in Central Asia and essentially needed to be developed from scratch, and in very short order. Thus, a new narrative and set of national identity markers were required that could both rationalize this rather inauspicious break with the past and legitimize the newly-constituted national leadership. In Uzbekistan, as well, national historiography became part of the same process of post-separation legitimation designed to strengthening the state at the domestic level. The politicization of both memory and the definition of “post-colonial” and “post-Soviet” thus became important elements of the Uzbek national narrative and political debate. At the scholarly level, the use of these definitions remains highly contentious,<sup>4</sup> with a significant proportion of historians and social

---

4. Marco Buttino summarized the debate on the imperial/colonial nature of the USSR, citing Ronald Grigory Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire,” in Ronald Grigory Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism,” in Suny and Martin, eds., *A State of Nations*. The fundamental volume on the “national” involvement in Soviet policy is Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Adeeb Khalid argues that use of the colonial category for the USSR is misleading: Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective,” *Slavic Review*, 65, 2 (2006): 231-51. Similarly, see Laura Adams, “Can We Apply a Post-Colonial Theory to Central Asia?,” *Central Eurasia Studies Review*, 7, 1 (2008): 2-8; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Post-Colonialism Compared: Potentials and Limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 34, 2 (2002): 279-97; Anatolii Remnev, “Kolonial’nost’, postkolonial’nost’ i istoricheskaya politika v Sovremennom Kazakhstane [Colonialism, Post-Colonialism and Historical Politics in Contemporary Kazakhstan],” *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2011): 169-205. The need to converge post-colonial and post-Soviet studies in order to overcome the limits of the Cold-war approaches is argued by Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery, “Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the

scientists stressing the idea of the Soviet Union as a continuation of the colonial system introduced during the Russian Empire,<sup>5</sup> while other authors argue that the USSR was an atypical empire that fundamentally restructured traditional notions of motherland-province, oppressor-oppressed and colonizer-colonized.<sup>6</sup> The leadership that took charge in Uzbekistan during perestroika faced its own challenge in addressing the nature of what post-Soviet order might emerge in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet political, economic and cultural systems.

During the initial period of crisis as the Soviet system began to breakdown after 1988, the approach of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (CPUz), Islom Abdugʻanievich Karimov was a kind of cautious ambiguity towards the collapsing order and the possibility of Uzbek independence, which the leadership was neither prepared for nor particularly keen to pursue. Over the ensuing two years, however, it became increasingly clear that a partition was inevitable and that a new path would need to be charted. The Uzbek leader therefore advanced a new nationalist narrative that set the ground for the ideological transition from communism to *Mustaqillik* and in 1991 Uzbekistan became an independent republic born of a mutually-agreed separation from the USSR. Nevertheless, many practical aspects of the old order—in politics, in the economy, and in the society more generally—were retained, and had to be incorporated within a nationalist agenda that would emphasize the pure “Uzbekness” of the new state and accelerate a policy of “Uzbekization” to place local-born cadres into every level of the political and administrative structure.<sup>7</sup>

As with other ex-Soviet republics, a national myth making process was required to legitimize the new political order in the now independent Uzbekistan. The borders of the state had been laid down as early as the 1920s, designating an area to

---

Cold War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51, 1 (December 16, 2008); Morgan Y. Liu, “Central Asia in the Post-Cold War World,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40 (2011). Abashin analyzes the debate along the political use of the past. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later”; Buttino, *Samarqanda*, 12.

5. See: Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

6. See: Adeeb Khalid, “The Soviet Union as an Imperial Formation: A View from Central Asia,” in A. Stoler, C. McGranahan, and P. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, 2007).

7. Uzbek nationalism is effective and, to some extent, as moderate as it is radical. Buttino argues that Uzbek nationalism is effective in so far as it builds the nation on national myths, “uzbekizites” the great heroes of the past, enhances the leader/father of the homeland and basically keeps a hostile attitude to neighboring countries. Nevertheless, it is a moderate nationalism as it does not indicate enemies—and neither the Russians—and it is aimed at preventing any popular violence. It is also a radical nationalism because it becomes the ideological reference by which, in the absence of other resources, has expropriated the non-Uzbeks—such as Russians and other minority groups—ousting them from managerial posts and basically pushing them to leave. This kind of moderate/radical nationalism is also in the other former Soviet republics where the costs of the socio-economic crisis had been often paid by the non-titular nations, creating consensus around the dominant (national) group. See: Marco Buttino, *In a Collapsing Empire: Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1993).

the Uzbek titular nation. In fact, in Uzbekistan “[references] to nationality became an official means of gaining access to power, privileges, and bonuses, while sometimes [being deployed as] a stigma, a tool for repression and discrimination.”<sup>8</sup> Although sovietization had been effective at the political (and even cultural) level, Uzbeks were permitted to maintain part of their traditional dimension (like the institution of *makhalla*<sup>9</sup>) and other aspects of Uzbekness were deployed affirming privileges as the titular nation within the Soviet republican system. This is because an Uzbek national state had never existed before 1920s and despite their high grade of sovietization, they had been allowed to keep many traditional aspects of the pre-Bolshevik society.

The creation of a (post-Soviet) Uzbek national identity thus became a fascinating creature that at once charted a new discourse and built on existing myths of the Uzbek historical legacy. Continuity with the modernizing and multi-ethnic discursive aspects inherited from Soviet experience were manifest.<sup>10</sup> In fact, every feature of the new national narrative lacked an orthodox interpretation but could be deployed in any given context as needed, depending on the particularities of the moment and the deep contradictions of a highly-fragmented society. Although a return to Islamic values seemed a natural dimension of this process in a country with a Muslim majority, Karimov took an ambiguous position regarding religion. In replacing the Soviet narrative, he initially embraced aspects of Islam as a pillar of *Mustaqillik* and the new Uzbek society. However, this trend would be reversed in short order, when it was determined that “Islamism” would pose more of a threat to the new order than a solution to the question of legitimation. This reconsideration emerged as soon as Islam was adopted as mobilizing discourse for the political opposition in Uzbekistan—and for a minor section of *Birlik*. During subsequent periods of communal strife—such as in the Ferghana valley tensions, the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), the war against terrorism and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (especially after the 1999 Tashkent bombings, the IMU invasions of 2000-2001, and the Tashkent attacks of March and July 2004)—the anti-Islamism of the Uzbek national leadership was reinforced. Thus, the initial liberal posture towards Islam was gradually repudiated, closing off the freedoms (especially in terms of religious habits and practices) that perestroika had made possible and legitimizing a police regime against what was cast as a (potential) terrorist/fundamentalist threat. Islam, then, remained an attenuated ideological base of

---

8. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later,” 82.

9. The *makhalla* is the name given to the typical Uzbek neighborhood, and the traditional institution that governs relations amongst its inhabitants.

10. The Soviet rhetoric of “brotherhood among nations” in a republic with “more than 100 national and ethnic groups” was revived in post-Soviet Uzbekistan where “multi-ethnic harmony” became a key pillar of official political discourse. *Mustaqillik* thus emerged as an ambiguously inclusive “civic ideology” that legitimized the national claim of the Uzbeks while not (formally) excluding non-Uzbeks from civic and political participation. Islam Abduganyevich Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Tradition and Survival* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), 41-51.

*Mustaqillik*, making a somewhat awkward contribution to a narrative that balances Muslim tradition, modernization, and secularization in an uneasy tension.

Having been, at the end of the Soviet period, subject to a kind of Moscow “trust administration” under the Banner of Perestroika (epitomized by the *krasnyi desant* during the cotton affair), Karimov’s regime propagated this new ideology with the aim of simultaneously justifying Uzbek independence, grounding its pure Uzbek nature and legitimizing the reconstituted Uzbek ruling elite, principally with a domestic audience in mind. The newly constituted Uzbek government was much more worried about the (fragmented) internal dynamics of Uzbek society than about projecting its influence abroad. Indeed, Uzbek nationalism hardly even touched the Uzbek diaspora, Uzbek minorities abroad and the transnational communities of Uzbek immigrants; it was far too concerned with addressing the tensions arising in domestic cleavages. As Abashin has argued,

the increasing tendency of the nation to fragment further along various fault-lines comes into view: rich regions and poor, the city (suburbs) and the village, Islamists, women, migrants, minorities etc. This does not mean that the nation has failed as a community or identity. It does, however, indicate that the process of national construction continues to date and is in constant flux: reacting to new conditions, changing trajectory, and continually finding itself in competition with other identities.<sup>11</sup>

In this framework, the *Mustaqillik* ideology underpinned an official narrative that evolved according to a Baconian dialectic between a *pars construens*—essentially, a celebration of the myth of a glorious past and the unique wonders of Uzbekness to cultivate a strong sense of belonging/affiliation<sup>12</sup>—and a *pars destruens* that cast the Soviet infamous past<sup>13</sup> as the source of all the problems and pathologies of the present. The overall effect of this dialectic was a sense of emancipation and legitimation of the post-Soviet Uzbek independence.

### **The condemnation of the Uzbek cotton affair (1983-1989)**

A crucial dimension of the *pars destruens* was a posture and discourse of self-victimization that the Uzbek leadership carefully crafted to condemn the Soviet

---

11. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later,” 86.

12. Such elements include national culture, traditions, religion, institutions, architecture, science, language, literature and its symbols, such as the poetry of Alisher Navoi, the science of Ulugh Beg and all those representatives of the “Central Asian renaissance,” etc.

13. Nevertheless, despite many perplexities on the Soviet modernization, the memory of the Soviet past and its official narrative are not exclusively negative. Indeed, there are some “positive” aspects related to the sacrifice of the Uzbek people in the common struggle against the German invaders. On this regard, a World War II memorial was constructed in Tashkent in 1999. Unofficially, also the “great power” status associated with the cold war is a very sensitive topic that still thrill the elder generation of Uzbeks.

experience *ex post*.<sup>14</sup> In this telling, Uzbekistan was the victim of a series of Soviet policies imposed on the country, particularly ethnic division (cast as the progenitor of interethnic clashes in Fergana valley in 1989 and during the '90s), economic planning (which triggered the food and consumer goods shortages in the republic after 1989), the division of labor (establishing cotton monoculture and Uzbekistan's total economic dependence upon it), water and agricultural policies (producing ecological disasters, such as salinization and pollution of the soil, as well as the drying up of the Aral sea), the imprudent overtures towards Islam during perestroika, and repression of the Uzbek people during Stalinism and in the 1980s. The cotton affair itself was cast as part and parcel of this last accusation. Indeed, it was described as the final stage of 1937 or even as an Uzbek genocide conducted by the two perestroika inquisitors Telman Gdlian and Nikolai Ivanov. In order to understand the vital role played by the Uzbek cotton affair<sup>15</sup> (1983-1989) in the evolution of *Mustaqillik* we must first explore how it was told initially (it was covered extensively in the Uzbek press up until 1989) to see how later (mostly in post-1991) interpretations were so dramatically distorted and recast.

The Uzbek cotton affair was one of the most famous corruption scandals to emerge in the final decade of the Soviet era. Pikhoya defined it as "one of the greatest examples of Andropov's demonstrative terror, aimed at tightening control over both republican and local politics."<sup>16</sup> This demonstrative policy was endorsed as well by Chernenko and then by Gorbachëv who, especially in the aftermath of the 27<sup>th</sup> CPSU Congress in 1986, ordered stronger measures against moral and material corruption in the USSR. After Brezhnev's tolerance, Moscow realized that every year the Soviet state was paying for 270-340 thousand tons of nonexistent Uzbek cotton<sup>17</sup> (as well as widespread fraud in other sectors). Indeed, between 1976 and 1983 the cotton scam had defrauded the state of almost four billion rubles.<sup>18</sup> The consequent season of massive investigations, purges and political trials, which

---

14. As Kudaibergenova demonstrates, there are similar narratives in the Kazakh presidential, national-patriotic and opposition political discourses. In Uzbekistan as well, opposition groups (and *Birlik* above all) shared significant aspects of post-colonial discourse with Karimov. However, while the "official" narrative remains ambiguous in terms of defining the responsibilities, the opposition charges both the former rulers and the current leadership (that was formed within the Soviet power structure) with collaboration; namely, of being puppets of Moscow. See Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "The Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-Independent Kazakhstan," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68, 5 (2016): 922.

15. A range of terminology is used to describe the events, including "cotton scandal," "cotton scam" or simply the "Uzbek affair."

16. Personal interview with Rudolf Germanovich Pikhoya, Moscow, 10 December 2015.

17. See: Andrea Graziosi, *L'Urss Dal Trionfo Al Degrado: Storia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1945-1991* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), 493.

18. William A. Clark, *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom: Combating Corruption in the Political Elite, 1965-1990* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 187; Leslie Holmes, *The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 101.



officially involved more than 20,000 people in the republic,<sup>19</sup> progressed in three different phases. The first, “hidden” phase (1983-1984) was characterized by preliminary inquiries amidst a general institutional silence and was conducted by the USSR central *prokuratura* and KGB officials in the Uzbek SSR. Initially, the case was not thought to have systemic implications and the previous power structures were preserved in the party and the SSR administration. During the second phase (systemic-repressive) between 1984 and 1986, the leadership in Moscow demanded that the CPUz elite take the battle against negative phenomena (*negativnye iavleniia*) to the party and to the state apparatus. What followed was spiraling dynamic that took the form of a kind of paranoid witch-hunt, which was often exploited in internal political struggles. In fact, in that period a denunciation campaign began in which dozens of letters were written—often anonymously—to the CC.<sup>20</sup> In seeking to implement the recommendations of the CPSU, the XVI plenum of the CPUz (June 1984)<sup>21</sup> endorsed a harsh campaign against corruption in every agricultural and industrial sector. The result was repression on a mass scale and purges of the CPUz and Uzbek SSR bureaucracies, eradicating the previous power structures at all levels of the hierarchy. In fact, as early as January 1985, 40 of the 65 *oblast* Party secretaries, 10 of the 13 *obkom* first secretaries, and 260 city and *raion* secretaries were removed from their posts.<sup>22</sup>

The final stage of the cotton scandal was characterized by a highly visible and public (with, in the context of perestroika, an intense media campaign that attracted an eager mass audience) crusade against corruption and falsification, led by Gdlian and Ivanov.<sup>23</sup> Throughout, the narrative of this campaign was cast around the

---

19. However, Donald Carlisle argues that the “Uzbek cotton affair” would had to involve, directly or indirectly, more than 58,000 people. Donald S. Carlisle, “Islam Karimov and Uzbekistan. Back to the Future?,” in T.J. Tucker and R.C. Colton, eds., *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

20. See: RGANI (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii – Russian State Archive of Contemporary History), f. 5, Apparat TsK KPSS [Apparatus of the CC CPSU], op. 90, o delakh TsK KPSS 1984 g. [about the affairs of the CC CPSU in 1984], d. 49, Perechen’ sekretaria KPSS Ligacheva. Proverki otdela po pismu Olumbekova T.T., Sedarenko B.D., o pervom sekretare TsK Kompartii Kirgizii Usabaliev [Checklist of the secretary of the CPSU Ligachev. Controls of the department on the letter of Olumbekov T.T. and Sedarenk B.D. about the first secretary of the CC of the Communist Party of Kirghizia Usabaliev].

21. RGASPI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii – Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. 17, Tsentral’nyi komitet KPSS [Central Committee of the CPSU], op. 153, Otdel organizatsionno-partiinoi raboty. Sektor informatsii (1984) [Department for Organizational-Party Work. Information Sector], d. 2450, Protokol 16 [Proces-verbal 16].

22. Donald S. Carlisle, “Power and Politics in Soviet Uzbekistan: From Stalin to Gorbachev,” in William Fierman, ed., *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 141.

23. See: GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii – State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. R 9654 S’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR i ikh organy [Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR, Supreme Soviet of the USSR and its organs], op. 4 Dokumenty o deputatskoi deiatel’nosti narodnykh deputatov SSSR. 1989-1991 gody [Documents on the deputy activities of the people’s deputies of the USSR. 1989-1991], d. 90 Otdel’nyye dokumenty o narodnykh deputatakh SSSR T. Gdliane i N. Ivanove (teksty vystuplenii, predvaritel’nyi otchet Komissii S’ezda) [Distinct documents on People’s Deputies

struggle against the *mafia* in the USSR. Indeed, during this period in which the Uzbek administrative and political order was essentially under the direct Moscow “trust administration” (1986-1989), investigations targeted the entire political system, provoking an understandable sense of frustration and humiliation within the Uzbek elite (typically represented by the *nomenklatura*). This humiliation reached its apogee during the so called *krasnyi desant* campaign, when hundreds of predominantly Russian cadres were sent to Uzbekistan to replace Uzbeks natives in command and control posts. At this moment, the local sense of disaffection with the empire was at its height, as Uzbeks felt their very self-determination was on the line and that Moscow had completely violated the unofficial social contract between centre and periphery within the Soviet system. It was at this moment that a new Uzbek narrative of the country’s Soviet experience—and a new official national ideolog—emerged.

The interethnic clashes and subsequent pogrom of Meskhetian Turks that took place in June 1989 proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. These developments signaled the end of Rafiq Nishanov’s leadership and he was immediately dispatched to Moscow to take up the position of Chairman of Soviet of Nationalities. Karimov, his designated successor as CPUz First Secretary, was an outsider within the upper echelons of the *nomenklatura*. He immediately cast himself in the role of peacemaker, launching a new political identity for Uzbekistan, the central ideological theme of which was *Mustaqillik* (independence). *Mustaqillik* essentially combined a soft (and non-orthodox) nationalist folklore with a set of *pars destruens* claims, undergirded by the rhetoric of Uzbek victimhood at the hands of the Soviet colonizers. Since that time, the Uzbek leader has propagated a sort of transgenerational post-colonial trauma narrative<sup>24</sup> in a country that had

---

of the USSR T. Gdlian and N. Ivanov (texts of speeches, preliminary report of the Commission of the Congress)]; GARF, f. R 9654, op. 2 Dokumenty Sekretariatov i komissii S’ezda narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 1989-1992 gody [Documents of Secretaries and the Commission of the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR, 1989-1992], d. 20 Materialy k voprosu o deiatel’nosti sledstvennoi gruppy Prokuratury Soiuza SSR, vozglavliaemoi T.Kh. Gdlianom [Materials on the issue of the activities of the investigation group of the Prosecutor’s Office of the USSR headed by T.Kh. Gdlian]. RGANI, f. 89 Kolleksiia kopii dokumentov, rasskrechnennykh pri vypolnenii tematicheskikh zaprosov v protsesse nauchno-issledovatel’skoi raboty, 1920-1991 gg. [Collection of copies of documents, declassified when performing thematic inquiries in the process of scientific research work, 1920-1991], op. 24 Gdlian-Ivanov delo [Gdlian-Ivanov Affair].

24. There is a broad academic debate on this concept. Here, trauma can simply be adopted to indicate “a frightening event outside of ordinary experience” that is “forging relationships of empathy and solidarity” among individuals of a community. Therefore, in relation to a colonial experience, there is “an attempt to construct an ethical response to forms of human suffering and their cultural and artistic representation.” Sonya Andermahr, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism,” *Humanities*, 4 (2015): 500-505. See also Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Fella Benabed, “An Indigenous Holistic Approach to Colonial Trauma and Its Healing,” *Literary Paritantra (Systems)*, 1, 1-2 (2009): 83-91; Ogaga Ifowodo, *History, Trauma, and Healing in Postcolonial Narratives. Reconstructing Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David Lloyd, “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2, 2 (2000): 212-28; Terry Mitchell, “Colonial Trauma: Complex, Continuous, Collective, Cumulative and Compounding,” (ed. Indigenous Research,

hitherto never considered itself as a colony within the Soviet system but rather as an example of highly successful integration of an archaic Asian society within the schema of Soviet modernization.<sup>25</sup> In this first phase of Karimov's mandate, the Uzbek leader was still quite cautious in establishing distance from the USSR and in condemning the practices of *krasnyi desant* that had characterized the previous Usmankhodzhaev and Nishanov mandates. Instead, he began to gradually assert his autonomy and to consolidate his personal power and legitimacy, rebalancing the equilibrium between Uzbek and Slav elites and replacing Moscow's men—mainly ethnic Russians appointed during the *krasnyi desant*—with Uzbeks in order to salve divisions within the local power network.<sup>26</sup> This assertion of autonomy by the CPUz leader can be read, *ex post*, as a sign of Moscow's increasing weakness.

In 1989, with the emergence of nationalist resentment against the central power and greater criticism and debates in the press because of glasnost, Uzbek public opinion started to consider even more critically the events of the so called cotton affairs, and in Moscow the case even became something of a media event coinciding with the Gdlian-Ivanov affair. In Uzbekistan, the newspaper *Pravda Vostoka*—the official organ of CPUz, which had previously followed these scandals by condemning the weakness of party discipline and the negative phenomena—started publishing testimonies and interviews against the two prosecutors, who had been acclaimed as heroes of glasnost' in previous years. It published an interview of the Deputy General Prosecutor of USSR, V.I. Kravtsev, who for the first time was declaring the story of Usmankhodzhaev, his dismissal and his implication in the cotton affair for an alleged bribe to Egor Ligachëv. At the end of the story, he denounced Gdlian and Ivanov as inquisitors who had been extorting confessions, including through torture.<sup>27</sup>

From 1989, the cotton scandal stories became media cases that the Uzbek press, radio, TV and official magazines—such as *Pozitsiia*, *Dialog*, *Narod i demokratiia*—started to follow very closely, confronting the versions expressed in the Soviet

---

2011); Abigail Ward, "Understanding Postcolonial Traumas," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 33, 3 (2013): 170-84.

25. Sharaf Rashidovich Rashidov, *Soviet Uzbekistan* (M.: Progress Publishers, 1982), 1-35.

26. There is a debate and criticism on the use of the term "clan" and its regional implications. I prefer Tuncer-Kilavuz's flexible concept of "local power networks" that refers to groups affiliated to interests rather than regional identity. See also Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Demian Vaisman, "Regionalism and Clan Loyalty in the Political Life of Uzbekistan," in Yaaev Roi, ed., *Muslim Eurasia Conflicting Legacies*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995); David Gullette, "Theories on Central Asian Factionalism: The Debate in Political Science and Its Wider Implications," *Central Asian Survey*, 26, 3 (September 14, 2007); Daria Fane, "Ethnicity and Regionalism in Uzbekistan. Maintaining Stability through Authoritarian Control," in L. Drobizheva, R. Gottemoeller, C. McArdle Kellcher, and L. Walker, eds., *Ethnic Conflict in Post-Soviet World: Case Studies and Analysis*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); Pauline Jones Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia, Perceptions and Pact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Idil Tunçer-Kılavuz, *Power, Networks and Violent Conflict in Central Asia: A Comparison of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan* (London – New York: Routledge, 2014).

27. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22076, 210, 13 September 1989, p. 3.

central press with the alternative versions they provided. These reportages were also instrumental in revealing how, among the *prokuratura* and public opinion, there were many doubts and a general disagreement about the validity of these criminal cases. Although in the Republic there were still groups that were helping the judicial reform process endorsed by the CPSU, the Uzbek press started to acknowledge that, from the central level, misinformation and imprecise facts had spread about the cotton affairs and the trial of Iurii Churbanov<sup>28</sup> and others. During these months, the Uzbek media closely followed and condemned the related case of Aleksandr Minkin, one of the first reporters to sensitize Soviet public opinion about the dramatic situation in Uzbekistan in terms of corruption, child labor and environmental issues related to the use of defoliants in the cotton fields. Meanwhile, across the whole of the USSR, Minkin's name became symbol of *glasnost'*, in the Uzbek press he was harshly accused of distorting the truth and defaming the positive improvements in the republic, fomenting political tensions and creating a false impression of the processes in the economy, ecology and cultural life of Uzbekistan.<sup>29</sup> However, history has proved that Minkin's denunciations were unfortunately well-founded.

### Self-victimization and the 'last repression' narrative

Upon the election of Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachëv as President of the USSR on 24 March 1990, the Uzbek Supreme Soviet nominated Karimov as President of the Uzbek SSR. The leader's ambiguous approach towards the Soviet project—on the one hand, laying out a discourse of brotherhood among the USSR peoples and, on the other, advancing a self-victimizing nationalist narrative for Uzbekistan—was clearly evident, even in this phase of double legitimation. Thus, Karimov and his affiliates maintained something of a schizophrenic position that both formally respected the Soviet role and laid so much blame at its feet. Here, the limits of the Soviet system and challenging issues such as the Gdlian-Ivanov affair were highlighted, to sensitize Uzbek public opinion and present the two prosecutors as enemies of the Uzbek people. Even the Supreme Soviet of the USSR acknowledged the risks of destabilization due to this case,<sup>30</sup> and the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR enforced a special commission to investigate the moral and substantive

---

28. Iurii Churbanov was the first deputy minister of internal affairs of the USSR (1980-1983) and famous for being the Brezhnev's son in law. He was involved in the "Uzbek affair" and arrested in 1987. At the end of the "Uzbek trial of the century" in 1988, Churbanov had been sentenced to twelve years in prison. Yuri Vasilevich Feofanov and Donald D. Barry, *Politics and Justice in Russia Major Trials of the Post-Stalin Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 108-25.

29. See Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, "Aleksandr Minkin: a pioneer of investigative journalism in Soviet Central Asia (1979–1991)," *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, January 2018.

30. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22258, 20 April 1990, 92, p. 3.

damage inflicted during the cotton affairs.<sup>31</sup> In the debate for the establishment of the permanent commissions of the Uzbek SSR Supreme Soviet, it emerged that:

every person needs glasnost as much as they need the air to breathe. Now people want to know everything that is going on—considering that previously they did not have the opportunity to objectively obtain the whole truth on all aspects of life—and the deputies have created a commission for *glasnost* [...]. In recent times, the expectations of the workers of the republic have not been met by the officials of the law enforcement [...] and now the commission is examining the work of *prokuratura* of the Oblast of Andijan and the results of the audit will be made known to the public. [...] The commission plans to examine the glasnost in the broadcastings of the State Committee of Uzbekistan on TV and Radio as well as the opinion of the public on critical articles and cartoons [...] and the fate of the people had been unjustly blackened by the press of the republic regarding the “cotton affair” will be controlled.<sup>32</sup>

It became increasingly clear that in Moscow, as in Tashkent, the Gdlian-Ivanov affair was assuming a political dimension, narrated as it was from the Uzbek point of view. One of the most loyal of Karimov’s original allies, the Uzbek Minister of the MVD, Kamalov, gave his version on the *mafia* accusations. Kamalov argued that the definition of *mafia*—in the sense of being related to organized crime—was used as a “play on words.” The term—which had become widespread at that time due to a popular Italian TV series entitled *La Piovra*—was simply an exaggeration, not to be taken seriously as a description of actual reality in Uzbekistan. Indeed, Kamalov affirmed: “we can easily say that there is fortunately no ‘mafia’ here [...] this term implies a huge criminal unit monopolizing action in many spheres” of public life. Conversely, in Uzbekistan the term *mafia* referred to the “activities of corrupt officials who carried out theft, handed out bribes on a large scale and had powerful patrons behind them [...]. Therefore] there is no link to define these phenomena as organized crime.”<sup>33</sup> This stance, advanced by the main person in charge of republican internal affairs, was targeted thus to wholly disavow the political campaign that Gdlian and Ivanov were advancing from Moscow.

Therefore, the case had repercussions for the entire political life of the republic. During the summer of 1990, there was an ambiguous attitude within Uzbek politics

---

31. On 12 September 1989, the Soviet Minister of the Uzbek SSR established a higher commission to reconsider to rework over the cotton affairs (*paxta ishi*), analyzing more than 40,000 documents and collaborating with the Supreme Court of the UzSSR for the rehabilitation of almost 3,500 prisoners. See: Asat Niyazovich Abdullaev, “Özbekistonda Paxta Yakkahokimligi va Uning Oqibatlari (1917-1991 Y.y.) [The cotton dominance in Uzbekistan and its consequences (1917-1991)]” (Tarix fanlari doktori ilmiy darajasini olish uchun taqdim etilgan dissertatsiya [Dissertation to obtain the scientific degree of Doctor of Historical Sciences]), Toshkent, 2010), 233.

32. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22302, 15 June 1990, 136, p. 2.

33. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22321, 155, 8 July 1990, p. 3.

towards the USSR. Even the declaration of sovereignty of the Republic of Uzbekistan—which affirmed local prerogative power over Uzbek population and territory<sup>34</sup>—was followed by self-victimizing rhetoric about the cotton affairs. Moreover, during the first stage of the XXII Congress CC CPUz (4–6 June 1990) the cotton affair was narrated differently than it had been before. The story was considered as a distortion of reality, a season of terror and mass repression, a humiliation and was thus evidence of the exploitative regime that the Soviets imposed in Uzbekistan. On that occasion, the party condemned the actions of Gdlian and Ivanov and asked for protection for people from that injustice.<sup>35</sup> In parallel, on 20 July 1990 the Supreme Court of the Uzbek SSR adopted the decision n° 4, introducing criminal liability for those defendants who, for the cases related to the cotton scams, had been given no other choice but to obey the orders of their superiors.<sup>36</sup> With an evident manifestation of petty annoyance, during the second stage of the XXII congress of CPUz (7–8 December 1990), the Uzbek president declared that the republic had honored its commitments with the USSR—even exceeding the economic cotton plan by more than 225 thousand tons—while the CPUz cadres were dissatisfied with the decisions of the CPSU on the resolution of the intra-national relations issues. On that occasion, Karimov reaffirmed the need to redefine the Union agreement—and the interaction among party, soviets and the social organizations—and a roadmap for the transition to a market economy, even considering the responsibilities for the ecological disaster in the Aral basin, in Karakalpakstan and in the pre-Aral *raiony* [sing. *raion*]. In this phase, highlighting ecological problems became a crucial point, constituting a further topic for the subsequent narrative of self-victimization in relation to environmental disasters brought about by Soviet policies of agricultural exploitation and cotton monoculture.

While the rhetoric of brotherhood and unity under the same communist party framework still survived, the national leader pushed for Uzbek economic and political autonomy. Indeed during that second stage of the XXII CPUz congress, Karimov highlighted the self-determination of the party, declaring that: “now we are an independent party and we ourselves have a responsibility to our people.”<sup>37</sup> On that occasion, S. Mamarasulov, First Secretary of the Tashkent obkom, delivered a harsh speech blaming perestroika and Gorbachëv, with the complicity of the old Uzbek leadership. In this emblematic intervention, he noted that:

---

34. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22307, 141, 22 June 1990, p. 1.

35. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 159 Otdel organizatsionno-partiinoi raboty. Sektor informatsii (1990) [Department for Organizational-Party Work. Information Sector (1990)], d. 1796 Protokol XXII s'ezda KPUz 4-6 iunia 1990 [Proces-verbal of the XXII Congress of the CPUz 4-6 June 1990].

36. This decision was contested by the Supreme Court of USSR (n 1-16/62-90 of October 26, 1990), but it was again reconfirmed by the resolution of the Plenum of the Supreme court of Uzbek SSR (n° 5-9-90 of 28 December, 1990). Materials exposed at the Museum in Memory of the Victims of Repression in Tashkent, accessed on 29 May 2015.

37. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 159, d. 1798 Protokol XXII s'ezda KPUz 7-8 dekabria 1990 [Proces-verbal of the XXII Congress of the CPUz 7-8 December 1990], l. 34.

the just assessment of the past is important for the party authority. I am talking about the so-called “cotton affairs” that were called illegally for all of us “Uzbek affairs” by irresponsible political speculators with the tacit approval of the central authorities. But how did this happen? I think the main mistake was made at the XXVII CPSU congress in the speech of M.S. Gorbachëv, when the party organization of the republic was accused of corruption and massive decadence. After this, Usmanhodzhaev and his group wanted to save their heads and left Uzbekistan to the mercy of events to CC CPSU, sending a letter with a request to send *severnij desant* [northern reinforcements]. And we know well what they were doing with the help of Gdlian and Ivanov. Thus, we have to say that this was a small genocide, a 1937 in the period of perestroika. And now that the truth is revealed the center pretends that nothing special happened, just one of many errors that occurred.<sup>38</sup>

This unforgiving speech sounded like a symptom of a weary empire by local elites, revealing the seriousness with which the moralization campaigns of the cotton scandal had been perceived in Uzbekistan and the need to rehabilitate the honor and the symbols of a people—guilty or innocent—who had felt humiliated during these massive investigative campaigns.

### The rehabilitation of Sharaf Rashidov

After 1990, Karimov consolidated his power<sup>39</sup> by bargaining, negotiating and making concessions to the elite, advancing an agenda of *trasformismo*,<sup>40</sup> coopting many opposition figures, and increasing his legitimacy in the eyes of the public. His remaining in power depended on how well he could satisfy elite expectations. In this perspective, some episodes became emblematic, such as the restoration of the Zhizzak oblast,<sup>41</sup> approved by decree on 16 February 1990. This event was highly symbolic because Karimov was essentially restoring a power base for the Zhizzak power network and cancelling one of those measures that had been made during the *krasnyi desant* to condemn the former first secretary of the CPUz, Sharaf Rashidovich Rashidov (1959-1983), his memory, and his (imposing) power network.

---

38. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 159, d. 1798, l. 42.

39. Carlisle, “Islam Karimov and Uzbekistan. Back to the Future?,” 196.

40. *Trasformismo* (Transformism) is an Italian concept—typical of post-unitarian Italy—that refers to the method of making wide and flexible coalitions in government by dividing, coopting and isolating opponents to remain in power while presenting the old regime in a renewed style. Quoting the character Tancredi in the novel *The Leopard* (by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa): “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

41. Zhizzak oblast was the native region of Sharaf Rashidov and became a key area of cotton production in the 1960s and 1970s. On September 6, 1988 during the ‘de-Rashidovization’ campaign led by the First secretary of the CPUz Rafiq Nishanov, the Zhizzak oblast was abolished and merged into the Syrdarya oblast.

The rehabilitation of Rashidov, a leader who had marked a quarter century of Uzbek political history, was not only intended to legitimize the ruling power elite—itsself formed during Rashidov’s period in power—but to restore the idea of an era of splendor regarding a period that had been vilified during the cotton scandal. In fact, Rashidov was officially recognized as the chief person responsible for the criminal situation in Uzbekistan at the XXI Congress CC CPUz (30 January 1986), when the “derashidovization” campaign condemned—post-mortem—the defunct leader as guilty of a vicious work style in cadre management, intrigue, formalism, indifference, abuse of power, corruption, theft, and scamming.<sup>42</sup> Gleason notes that,

by the mid-1980s Rashidov was being publicly ridiculed and denounced for having fostered “*Sharafrashidovshchina*.” Rashidov [wa]s accused of having built for himself a political machine quite unlike anything anticipated by the conventional interpretation of the latitude of local officials in the USSR.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, in June 1986, the CC CPUz and Soviet Ministrov Uzbek SSR even decreed a sort of *damnatio memoriae* against the former First Secretary, who was cast as:

personally responsible for all deviations from the Leninist norms of party life, distortions in working with cadres, the spread of corruption, forgery, fraud and serious flaws in the ideological and political life of the republic. Having been for a long time first secretary of the CC CPUz, he cultivated an atmosphere of splendor and self-congratulation in the country, was unaware of collegiality, criticism and self-criticism, encouraging fraud against the state and parochialism. According to his will, the cadres were generally placed on the basis of kinship, familism, personal fidelity—often out of greed. So many key positions in the organs of the party, the soviets and agriculture of the republic were occupied by relatives and people close to him. Unfairly, we had honored and diverted from criminal liability, people pandering and the people in charge of him who have committed serious violations. To create a false appearance of well-being in the economy [...] for the period 1978-1983 4.548 million tons of non-existent cotton were falsified, for which kolkhozes and sovkhoses received from the state 2.866 billion rubles. Out of that, supposedly for salaries, 1.178 billion rubles were paid. A significant portion of these funds were used to bribe various officials. Now, through criminal accusations alone, over 22 thousand people have been charged. [...] Believing in his infallibility, Rashidov was put beyond the control and, with unworthy means, he created around him false authority and tried to assign undeserved honors and awards. According to the statements and testimonies of the employees and the former executives under investigation, Rashidov systematically obtained expensive gifts and bribes. These party activities led by Rashidov had undermined the

---

42. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 155 Otdel organizatsionno-partiinoi raboty. Sektor informatsii (1986) [Department for Organizational-Party Work. Information Sector (1986)], d. 2296, Protokol XXI s’ezda KPUz. [Proces-verbal of the XXI Congress of the CPUz]

43. Gregory Gleason, “Fealty and Loyalty: Informal Authority Structures in Soviet Asia,” *Soviet Studies*, 43, 4 (1991): 617.



faith of the people of the Republic in the power of Soviet law and social justice, determining significant material damage to the state, holding back economic development and bringing to the moral decline and the degeneration of a significant part of the managerial cadres.<sup>44</sup>

This *damnatio memoriae* cancelled any commemoration of his name, restored original place names and removed the financial and housing support to his family.<sup>45</sup> While the Uzbek affair became a media issue throughout the USSR, Rashidov's name was in fact associated with that of a Mafia godfather. Nevertheless, after 1990, a campaign for the rehabilitation of Sharaf Rashidov became a crucial part of Uzbek public debate, becoming something of a *cause célèbre*, even in the official Uzbek press.<sup>46</sup> In an interview published in the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* in 1991, President Karimov responded to Rashidov's rehabilitation, explaining how his name was a symbol of recent events in Uzbekistan and how he had become a scapegoat for the period of stagnation:

The attitude towards Rashidov was defined during the XXII Congress of the CPUz and at the III session of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic. I agree with the assessment that has been made in these places. The meaning of these evaluations is that the personality of Rashidov cannot be decontextualized from the period in which he lived and worked. I have to say that the hardest crisis that hit us was not economic, but moral. The consequences of the destruction of the ancient moral traditions for the sake of ideological reasons will be much more difficult to overcome than economic problems. Not long ago, a communist who had an important position could not go to the cemetery to honor his deceased loved ones. Participation in the process of burial has been associated with mortal sin, and the person was expelled from the party and removed from his position. To reconcile with his conscience and to not lose what has been achieved over many years, people even preferred to "go to hospital" or leave on "urgent" business trips when a relative died. Moreover, after this, we say to people there is nothing left of the spiritual dimension and the double morality regarding religion took on its ugliest form. A million and a half of the inhabitants of the republic who had the opportunity to watch Afghan TV have seen that the Soviet army was building and restoring mosques there. Meanwhile, here the mosques were destroyed. This attitude lasted until 1988 [...] when those 24,000 criminal cases connected with the cotton [affair] started such that villains and even their victims appeared behind bars. This has undermined the people's faith in justice. Meanwhile, our managers regularly reported to Moscow about those thousands of people arrested or expelled from the party for the facts related to cotton. Not all of them were convicted in vain, but this is not a justification for the thousands of innocent who have been persecuted unjustly. Only lately, we have compensated 1.5 million rubles to those who had been unjustly sentenced,

---

44. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 155, d. 2316 Protokol Buro n. 9 [Proces-verbal of the buro, n. 9], l. 11-12.

45. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 155, d. 2316, l. 9-10.

46. At that time, the article "Nostalgia for the "lord" was emblematic. Who needs Rashidov's rehab?," *Pravda Vostoka*, 22474, 8, 11 January 1991, p. 3.

and now released and rehabilitated. [About the years of stagnation] why in the ranks of Brezhnev people, they recall just Rashidov, while his other companions live serenely out from the public or have returned to political activity? In this imbalance, we can see the injustice.<sup>47</sup>

Then, since 1990, the legal and honorary rehabilitation of victims thus became one of the main points of Karimov's political agenda which advanced an agenda of forgiveness towards those former culprits who has seemingly overnight become victims of the repressive Soviet system. According to the Uzbek leader, corruption and falsifications in Uzbekistan were just one example of a wider problem related to the stagnation period. However, the republic became the scapegoat for the whole Soviet system. During the same interview, the reporter asked him why his opponents were linking his moderation towards Rashidov with the fact that he also had concentrated in his hands so much power since becoming President of the Uzbek SSR, head of the cabinet (the former Soviet Ministrov) and First secretary of the CC CPUz. Thus, Karimov answered that his actual status was the "requirement for the time of the transition to face the explosive situation which was formed in the country and in the republic".<sup>48</sup> In this way, the self-victimization rhetoric, the need to rehabilitate the victims of repression and the continuous call to an emergency situation would become elements that President Karimov continued to apply in order to legitimize his power even in the following decades, laying the blame on the Soviet past to justify the present. According to the Uzbek president, the negative phenomena related to the cotton scandal were the natural outcome of Soviet policies of cotton monoculture, imposed on Uzbekistan with the most severe means:

and those who did not agree were removed or replaced. [Moscow] chose those who were obedient, declaring that they would reach the [five-year] plan in [just] two years. It remained only to seed cotton on the sills or on the roofs. We have provided the independence of cotton [to the USSR] but, in return, we have received economic dependence. Everything was just created for the final purpose of cotton. Now we need to import more than half of our consumer goods.<sup>49</sup>

Subsequently, the narrative emerged that Rashidov, although the main culprit or an accomplice, had effectively had no choice and had done everything possible to protect his people from the exploitation of Moscow. On 18 October 1991, during a commemoration of Alisher Navoi—considered one of the fathers of Uzbek literature—the rehabilitation of the literary work of Sharaf Rashidov<sup>50</sup> was

---

47. Izvestiia's interview with Karimov reported in *Pravda Vostoka*, 22487, 21, 30 January 1991, p. 2.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22514, 48, 8 March 1991, p. 1.

50. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22671, 205, 19 October 1991, p. 1.

finally revived. Meanwhile, his controversial name was still signifying absolutism, nepotism, patrimonialism, stagnation and corruption in the rest of Soviet Union. Conversely, in Uzbekistan, Rashidov, his literary works, his family and even his power network were rehabilitated by politics and history.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Rashidov was recast as a patriot, a national hero—who behaved in such a way to maximize the Uzbeks' interests sharing power and wealth amongst the Uzbek people—and a symbol of revenge and resistance against Soviet colonial rule. This, then was a curious paradox, considering the work of the longest-serving Soviet leader who had himself been a key contributor to the Sovietization of Uzbekistan. Similarly, both Usmankhodzhaev and Nishanov were represented as “Moscow’s puppets,” responsible for the repression against the Uzbek people. However, Rashidov and his successors responded to central policies in order to legitimate their power, endorsing and declaring what Moscow wanted to hear. The campaign for six million tons and the struggle against the negative phenomena had both a confirmatory-legitimizing intent in order to demonstrate loyalty to the Soviet cause. In this power structure, the latest Soviet leaders of Uzbekistan were probably not so different in their role.

Since 1991, monuments and streets in Tashkent—as well as in other cities of Uzbekistan—have been dedicated to Rashidov’s memory and in Zhizzak—his native city—the Uzbek government endorsed several initiatives in his name. For 75th anniversary Rashidov’s birth (6 November 1992) there were celebrations all around the city and several places were renamed in his honor, a monumental complex with his bust was inaugurated, a *madrasa*, and the Monumental Museum Sh. Rashidov dedicated to “the important statist and public figure, poet and writer, twice hero of labor”<sup>52</sup> were founded. The museum was officially established by a decree of President Karimov to celebrate a symbol of modernization and Uzbek independence. This narrative correlates both Rashidov’s rehabilitation and *Mustaqillik*, to imply a relationship of interdependence. As it is stated in the museum, “with the independence of our motherland, even the good name of the unforgettable Sh. Rashidov is returned,” celebrating “one of the best sons of the fatherland” who said once “if Uzbekistan ever become independent, I will put gold in front of every house.” The museum was located in a former school library (built during Rashidov’s period in office) to contain a collection of his personal belongings donated by his daughter, Sayyora Rashidova. Accordingly, Zhizzak became the center for the memory of Sharaf Rashidov and the celebrations of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, in November 2017, were impressive with an ambitious plan of monuments, events, and urban embellishment in order to make the city “as beautiful as he dreamed.”<sup>53</sup>

---

51. Saidakbar Rizaevich Rizaev, *Sharaf Rashidov. Shtrikhi k portretu* [Sharaf Rashidov: Traits to a Portrait] (Tashkent: Yozuvchi, 1992).

52. The official statement expressed in the brochure of the Monumental Museum Sh. Rashidov in *Zhizzak*, donated by museum’s curator. Interview in *Zhizzak*, 13 June 2015.

53. *Ibid.*

Thus, Rashidov (and his works) became the main symbol to be rehabilitated against the humiliation of the “Uzbek affair.” According to a senior executive of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan (FATi)<sup>54</sup> there could be even an attempt to rehabilitate this Breznevian symbol as a sort of *jadid*, a “partisan with the pen” who peacefully struggled against the colonial power.<sup>55</sup> This provocation can appear paradoxical when related to a Soviet leader, but it is based on the fact that Sharaf Rashidov represented a model of progress and development in a Muslim society, “defending the interests of Uzbek people.” However, contrary to the *jadids*, he was also the endorser of a deep sovietization process that erased national culture and tradition.<sup>56</sup> Wooden and Stefes have commented the rehabilitation as a direct political maneuver: “Karimov’s decision to embrace past policies and to rehabilitate Rashidov, as well as other officials involved in the cotton affair, would also result in the return of members of the former First Party Secretary’s Soviet-era elite.”<sup>57</sup> This political analysis is sharp, considering that the Rashidovian elite was mostly restored and ruled for more than three decades after Rashidov’s death.

### The path towards an involuntary independence

In the first months of 1991, Karimov stressed the responsibility of the Soviet government for the cotton scandal, as well as for the monoculture and the related ecological disaster in the Aral Basin, even as he was restoring the figure of Rashidov. However, Karimov continued to profess his loyalty towards the Soviet cause, excluding the possibility of secession. In fact, during the IV Plenum of the CC CPUz (12 March 1991), Karimov explained that this kind of maneuver might be a hazard because the country was not ready for sudden independence. On that occasion, the Uzbek president invited the electorate to vote—in a referendum on 17 March—to remain within in the USSR. He affirmed that the destruction of the Soviet Union

means the threat of legal chaos, the first manifestations of which we already feel as a result of separatist aspirations, violations of economic and productive relations [...] only a renewed union of sovereign and independent republics will be the warranty and the condition for the free development of each republic.<sup>58</sup>

---

54. The institute is the official institution responsible for defining the historiography. In Soviet times, the institute was a party organ under the Institute of Marxism Leninism of the CC CPSU.

55. Interview with a senior executive of FATi, Tashkent, 19 June 2015.

56. Interview with a senior executive of FATi, Tashkent, 23 May 2015.

57. Amanda E. Wooden and Christoph H. Stefes, *The Politics of Transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Enduring Legacies and Emerging Challenges* (London – New York: Routledge, 2009), 150.

58. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22516, 50, 13 March 1991, p. 2.

In the end, during the referendum on the future of the Soviet Union (March 17, 1991) 9 215 571 Uzbek voters (93.9%) voted in favor of remaining in the Union,<sup>59</sup> one of the highest rates in the whole Soviet Union. It seemed then that, despite perestroika being presented by Tashkent as a camouflaged repressive maneuver, Uzbek citizens still wanted to stay within the USSR.

However, the Uzbek press kept pursuing accusations against the perestroika democracy, reminding the public of how the cotton affair could be considered as but the latest dose of humiliation, violence and repression, akin to that Uzbekistan had experienced during the '30s and '50s.<sup>60</sup> Karimov, again, took part in the media quarrel, and during his speech at the V session of the Uzbek SSR Supreme Soviet, he replied to those he called "slandorous inventions" of Soviet newspapers, and joked in the following way about himself: "President Karimov, thus violating the law, frees people from prison who have been convicted for the 'cotton affairs'."<sup>61</sup> He was, substantially, taking the responsibility of this rehabilitation course.

Karimov's attitude towards the (failed) conservative *putsch* in Moscow—which was openly supported by other Central Asians leaders—was ambiguous, assuming a very careful position. However, the *putsch* produced the definitive step towards an inevitable, if unwelcome, independence. On 23 August, Karimov resigned from the Communist Party and on 26 August, he nationalized the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the KGB. In his speech at the CC CPUz plenum of 28 August 1991, the Uzbek president condemned the "criminal attempt of coup of 19–21 August" and protested against Gorbachëv's decision to resign as General Secretary of CPSU. However, he took note of the events specifying that

[the] dissolution of the party and of the fate of its property should be decided by the plenum or by the party congress [...] but today after the declaration of Gorbachëv the harsh realities of life raise questions about our party. [...] Nevertheless] these questions can be answered only by the congress of communists of the Republic.<sup>62</sup>

At the end, the failed *putsch* had finally and irreversibly undermined the credibility and solidity of Soviet power. Finally, on 30 August the property of the CPUz was nationalized and the party cut its ties with the CPSU.<sup>63</sup> On 31 August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR officially sanctioned the renamed Republic of Uzbekistan as a sovereign and independent state, effective 1 September 1991.

Although Karimov was cautious in his initial speeches—balancing national interests with support for the Soviet cause—he assumed a hard tone following the

59. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22522, 56, 21 March 1991, p. 3.

60. *Soviet Uzbekistoni*, 17 April 1991, p. 2.

61. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22580, 114, 15 June 1991, p. 2.

62. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22633, 167, 29 August 1991, p. 1.

63. At this point, the CPUz was formally renamed as the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDPU) and effectively transformed on 1 November 1991.

proclamation of independence of a republic that was, formally at least, still part of Soviet Union. In his speech at the VI extraordinary session of the Uzbek Supreme Soviet, the President declared:

Everything that was done to us, our people, Uzbekistan, differed little from the policy of the [colonial] pre-revolutionary period, and the republic was not much more than a source of raw materials. It was in the mind of all the organs of the union, who knew only that this region had to provide cotton, raw materials, while the rest of our needs remained our problem to resolve. They promised much, but none of it was honored. For the state independence in terms of cotton, the republic had to make many sacrifices, putting the people of Uzbekistan in total dependence on the import of meat, milk and most essential goods for the subsistence of life. We must say that this policy led Uzbekistan to the brink of collapse, with the lowest *per capita* income and a budget that had the character of a grant. And we were supposed to be “grateful” for any meagre ration we received from the center. By this moment, we had finally realized who our friends and who our enemies were, who wanted well-being and peace [for us] and who was hiding a stone behind his back.<sup>64</sup>

This reformulation, which assumes properly anticolonial rhetorical tones, indicated the following fact: that the USSR was, effectively, over. On the same occasion, the Supreme Soviet promulgated a decree of amnesty on the occasion of Independence Day of the Republic of Uzbekistan that pardoned many prisoners condemned during the cotton affairs.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, this decree became a key political issue in Karimov’s agenda. In the program of the renamed People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, the first item was entitled “lessons of history and the path forward” saying that “the story of many family stories have become the allegations related to persecution on so-called cotton affairs, but this past way showed the futility of the administrative system and totalitarian control with its anti-people policy.”<sup>66</sup> In this political program, there were several references to the other mentioned traumas of cotton monoculture and its disastrous ecological consequences.<sup>67</sup> Emblematically, Karimov used often the cotton affairs issue to reformulate the ideology of *Mustaqillik* and independence appeared as a rebirth of the nation in the likeness of the *Homa*, the legendary phoenix-like bird that, in 1992, was officially established as the symbol of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

---

64. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22636, 170, 1 September 1991, p. 2.

65. Specifically, this amnesty pardoned men over 60 years old and women over 65; handicapped of I & II type, women with minor children or pregnant, veterans of World War II and other wars, women with condemns until five years (minor crimes), exiled people. This amnesty was not directly directed to those criminalized for cotton affairs but, indirectly, has benefited a large part of these who had filled the prisons in last years. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22636, 170, 1 September 1991, p. 2.

66. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22661, 195, 5 October 1991, p. 1.

67. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22661, 195, 5 October 1991, p. 2.

### Rewriting memory to promote *Mustaqillik*

The use of a trauma like the “Uzbek Affair”—a fresh experience that involved a large part of the elite emotionally against the central power in Moscow—is still implemented in Uzbek politics to garner popular legitimation. The USSR legalization season became a symbol of restyled purge and unfair Soviet persecution against Uzbeks who “felt they had been blamed unfairly for the results of Moscow’s inflexible and unrealistic cotton procurement policies. [...]they resented their portrayal in the Soviet press as being temperamentally corrupt, a criticism that offended their sense of national honor.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, since 1989 in Uzbekistan it has become common to interpret the cotton scandal (and the related scandals of child labor in cotton fields) as a normal consequence of colonialism or an error of planning policies. This interpretation is also presented by Ahmed Rashid who seems to understand the informal/shadow economy as the only way to survive under the inefficient USSR:

the black economy [...] amounted to one third of the total economy in Central Asia [...] and] corruption was [...] a safety valve to keep the system running and allow clan networks to operate to alleviate local problems, food shortages and unemployment.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, Karimov was able to promote himself as the father of the newly independent Uzbekistan who alone broke ties with this perverse colonial system. During the campaign for the presidential election, he gave a speech addressed “to all citizens of Uzbekistan” in which he stated that [in the last months]:

the popular festivals and traditions had been revived and thousands of people unjustly repressed were rehabilitated [...] The situation in Uzbekistan has been exasperating also because we have been the victim of colonial expansion of Tsarist Russia and the short-sighted policy of leaders of later ages, who have condemned us to distorted development and a one-sided economy. Our region has been transformed as the appendix of raw materials for the other industrial regions.<sup>70</sup>

In this way, the Uzbek president reversed the previous narrative—which spoke of a republic that was fully contributing to the Soviet cause—through exploitation rhetoric, casting the cotton monoculture issues, such as the cotton scandal, as a consequence of a colonial system. This justification narrative was not only theoretical

---

68. Tom Everett, *Central Asia, Aspects of Transition* (London – New York: Routledge, 2003), 148.

69. Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia, Islam or Nationalism?* (London: Zed Books, 1995), 66, 92.

70. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22701, 235, 3 December 1991, p. 1.

but also had judicial effects<sup>71</sup> and political implications in terms of popular legitimation. In fact, at the fourth point of the political program presented by Karimov at the Supreme Soviet in November 1991, there was even the plan for a general amnesty of those people that had been condemned during the so-called “cotton affairs.”<sup>72</sup> This point was implemented four days before the presidential elections on 25 December 1991, the day on which the USSR itself and the darkest page of its recent history in the memory of Uzbeks were buried.

Since independence, Karimov has continued to exploit those arguments to enforce the ideology of *Mustaqillik*, self-victimization and pride in the renaissance of the Uzbek nation to legitimize the new course of independent Uzbekistan represented by him. Therefore, self-victimization, criticism against the USSR—and its colonial policies—and the rejection of the Soviet past gave a first base to the independence claims after 1989, considering in part the birth of the new nation as a people liberated from the Soviet system. Karimov’s policies of desovietization replaced the old communist ideology with the values of *Mustaqillik*, a name that became the key word used to designate emblematic places, such as the former Lenin square and the main roads of Tashkent, to destroy and replace and the symbols of Soviet memory. In order to advance this identity/legitimizing ideology and its *pars destruens*, even official Uzbek historiography started to invest in the self-victimization themes of repressions, repeatedly referring to the cotton affairs (in Uzbek “*paxta ishi*”) of the ’80s as the last stage of a long-running Soviet terror. *Mustaqillik* also became the main leitmotiv in the contemporary Uzbek academy and the key reference on which scholars interpret national scientific development. A professor of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies affirms:

*Mustaqillik* became the fundamental value to be followed also in academic production. The structure to base scientific research remained the same as in Soviet times, even if the ideology has changed. In the introduction of every essay, the word *Mustaqillik* is one of the first to be mentioned. Before it was communism. In the second paragraph, there is a necessary cross-reference/quotation of Karimov, whereas before we used Brezhnev, Andropov etc. In the third paragraph, there must appear references to the national

---

71. After establishing the higher commission on the cotton affairs in September 1989, more than 800 sentences connected with the cotton affairs were reexamined by Uzbek courts already in 1990. In February 1991, the Supreme Court of the UzSSR examined and acquitted another 241 cases, rehabilitating 1,600 wrongly convicted and dispensing more than 1.5 million rubles in compensations. Then, on 25 July 1991 the Ministries of Justice of the UzSSR and the RSFSR signed an agreement of judicial cooperation—the first of this kind and before the Soviet collapse—that effectively became the legal basis for transferring those cases that were still under the jurisdiction of the SC USSR in Moscow. Hence, in the fall of 1991, Karimov ordered to transfer the latest grand trials and culprits—as Adylov, Usmanhodzhaev and Khudayberdiyev—to Uzbekistan. See: *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 2 April 1991, p. 1 and George Ginsburgs, *The Soviet Union and International Cooperation in Legal Matters - Part III: Criminal Law* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1994), 298–99.

72. *Pravda Vostoka*, 22690, 224, 19 November 1991, p. 1.



ideological values of *Mustaqillik*, which replaced, of course, references to Marxism-Leninism.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, since 1989 the official historiographical narrative was also officially replaced by a new interpretation of the facts. The Institute of Party History at the CC CPUz was expressly ordered to change the tones of “demagogy, apology and dogmatism” of the previous years in order to “revise entrenched in the literature unilaterally, often biased in favor of the official assessment of the concept of many facts of the events of the past, many prominent figures of the Communist party etc.,” carrying out a historiographical narrative of “repressions” (especially related to the Stalinist period). In reference to past historical works, the attempt to “distort the history of the country and the party, presenting it as a continuous chain of tragic mistakes, excesses, repressions and blames to the party”<sup>74</sup> was condemned. Nowadays, the Uzbek historian Khurshida Yunusova carefully reconstructs the facts and provides an Uzbek version according to which the cotton scandal was just a symptom of a wider disease of the Soviet Union. However, according to Yunusova, Uzbekistan became a scapegoat that was deflecting the attention from the real corruption in Moscow and in other regions of the empire.<sup>75</sup> Even figures such as Telman Gdlian and Nikolai Ivanov, presented in Uzbek historiography as muscovite *torquemadas*,<sup>76</sup> are sometimes interpreted simply as Moscow’s puppets.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the senior executive of FATi offers a version that denotes the “suffering of the Uzbek people,” affirming that—in the history of Soviet repressions and their “media manipulations”<sup>78</sup>—Uzbekistan became an “experimental test site” (*poligon*) for these new forms of judiciary purges during the 5-6 years of the “cotton affair terror.” Indeed,

---

73. Personal interview with a professor of the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, 26 June 2015.

74. Annual report (1989) of the Institute of Party History at CC CPSU, Tashkent, 1990, RGASPI, f. 71 Institut marksizma-leninizma pri TsK KPSS (IML) 1931-1991 [Institute of Marxism-Leninism under the CC CPSU (IML) 1931-1991], op. 39 Otdel filialov i koordinatsii nauchno-issledovatel'skoi raboty [Department of branches and coordination of scientific-research work], d. 198 Godovoi otchet filiala IML Tashkent (1990) [Annual report of the Tashkent IML branch (1990)], l. 91.

75. See: Khurshida Yunusova, *Òzbekistonda Sovet Davlatining Milliy Siyosati va Uning Oqibatlari (XX Asrning 80 Yillari Misolida)* [The national policy of the Soviet Union in Uzbekistan and its consequences (the case of the 1980s)] (Tashkent: Zar qalam, 2005).

76. However, the worst allegations against the Gdlian-Ivanov group came from Viktor Ivanovich Iliukhin, one of the prosecutors who fought against it, accusing it of “gross illegal methods of investigation”. See: Viktor Ivanovich Iliukhin, *Oborotny: kak bylo nadumano “uzbekskoe” delo* [Werewolves: how the “Uzbek” affair has been contrived] (Tashkent: Uzbekiston, 1993).

77. Khurshida Yunusova, “The Ferghana Valley during Perestroika 1985-1991,” in S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), 182-83.

78. Since 1989, the idea that media—acting as a “fourth power”—was manipulating/exploiting “cotton affair” stories to unjustifiably blame Uzbek people has spread. *Dialog*, vol. 1, January 1991, p. 31.

the repressions in the '80s were against the national system and even against the Uzbek people themselves. However, society was neither cohesive nor immunized against those attacks. At the end of the story, these years consolidated society, forging anti-Russian, anti-imperial and independent passions. This period coincided with disaffection and disillusion towards the USSR, corresponding to the end of the communist ideology in Uzbekistan, because the Uzbek people were perceived as living in a colony whose requests were barely heard—and certainly not heeded—by the center [...]. In this story, President Karimov was an independent figure who refused to obey Gorbachëv's orders, a patriot able to find a solution and to struggle against a stronger and larger enemy that wanted to reaffirm its imperial power over Uzbekistan. For Uzbek people, this story coincides with the last stage of a long-lasting colonial period.<sup>79</sup>

This interpretation provides a clear perspective on the—nationalist and *Mustaqillik* biased—Uzbek contemporary historiography. Also a professor of FATi affirmed that:

Due to the cotton affair experience, Uzbekistan could find reasons and myths over its independence, understanding the USSR as a colonial, exploitative, and external power. During the long Soviet experience, Uzbekistan was clouded by an ideology that had concealed the need for independence from Russia and, despite some positive interpretations of the Brezhnev period, there was never effective autonomy. In fact, Rashidov could also be seen as subservient to Moscow! Thus, the myths about him are not for an inane independentist action but since he was a patriot that protected, in his way, the Uzbek people.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, it is evident how even contemporary historiography gives an interpretation of the facts that contributes to create the Soviet memory trauma and to consolidate the doctrine of *Mustaqillik* and its *pars destruens*,<sup>81</sup> to legitimate the transition from USSR. In this purpose, in May 1999 Karimov created the Commission for the Promotion of the Memory of Victims<sup>82</sup> to investigate on violations and political repressions during the colonial and Soviet periods; and in May 2001 he declared August 31—the day before Independence Day—the Day of Remembrance

---

79. Personal interview with a senior executive of FATi. Tashkent, 12 June 2015.

80. Personal interview with a professor at FATi. Tashkent, 19 June 2015.

81. See: Andrew F. March, "The Use and Abuse of History: 'National Ideology' as Transcendental Object in Islam Karimov's 'Ideology of National Independence,'" *Central Asian Survey*, 21, 4 (2001).

82. Brian Grodsky suggests that "By framing justice process in a way that depicts Uzbekistan's communists as victims rather than as oppressors, and creates a symbolic break with the past, Karimov has sought to use "truth" to transform his own image. [...] Karimov's truth process was, at least initially, designed primarily to alleviate other Western human rights pressures, rather than to enhance the historical understanding of his fellow countrymen." Basically, this "truth commission transferred historical responsibility for rights abuses from the all-inclusive communists to the Russians." Brian K. Grodsky, *The Costs of Justice: How New Leaders Respond to Previous Rights Abuses* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 173, 179, 182.

for the Victims of Repressions.<sup>83</sup> At museological level, the Museum in Memory of the Victims of Repression, created in Tashkent by the initiative of President Karimov in 2002, has as its core mission the moral rehabilitation of the victim's honor. The museum narrates a period of repressions that started in the pre-revolutionary Russian colonial period and assumed its worst shapes in Soviet times when "the repressions assumed a total dimension and were enforced at any level of society and individuals."<sup>84</sup> Most of the exhibition is dedicated to the repression of *jadids*<sup>85</sup> and kulaks in the '30s, the great purges and GULAG system, the ethnic deportations during World War II, the cotton monoculture, and Aral Sea ecological disaster. Finally, there is a section dedicated to the cotton affair that quotes a harsh commentary prepared by President Karimov, for visitors to read:

Uzbek society never forgets the tragedies known as the "cotton affair," "Uzbek affair" and which were shameful slanders for us, the Uzbek people. Over that time, human rights and the rule of law were destroyed, thousands of blameless people were in jail and local people were slaughtered in great numbers. Islom Karimov.

In the same cotton affair room, a severe banner states:

The deceptions of the colonial regime were uncovered because of the will-power and resistance of President Islom Karimov. Our blameless people are thus justified and their rights restored.

The final hall is dedicated to the heroes and symbols of Uzbek independence and identity, including President Karimov, Amir Timur, Mirzo Ulugbek, Babur and, for this reason, it can be considered as an effective evidence of our suppositions. The myth of resistance against colonial power (as the cotton affair is presented) is a fundamental element of self-victimization aimed at consolidating and to commemorating the *Mustaqillik* ideology, and the two aspects—*pars construens/pars destruens*—are necessarily interrelated. The example of this museum is indicated in order to further articulate what this article argues. Indeed, there is an official institution that represents the contemporary history of Uzbekistan in a serious manner, mixing the critics against Soviet totalitarianism with anticolonial issues such as the two main obstacles of independence during the former regime. The lack of distinction between these two separate aspects strengthens inexorably the echo of criticism and creates a confusion of overlapped concepts. This misperception finds its

---

83. *Ibid.*, 183.

84. Personal interview with a high executive of the Museum in Memory of the Victims of Repression, Tashkent, 8 June 2015.

85. See: Ravshan Abdullaev, Namoz Khotamov, and Tashmanbet Kenensariyev, "Colonial Rule and Indigenous Responses, 1860-1917," in *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. S. Friederick Starr (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2011).

endemic reason even in the strategic role that Uzbekistan covered within the Soviet system and it contributes to perfectly define the paradoxes over *Mustaqillik* in its *pars construens/destruens*, evidencing a self-victimization towards those policies that had been implemented during Soviet period and that often persist in contemporary Uzbekistan.

Thus, the policy of nationalities and their violent consequences, the imposition of cotton monoculture—narrated as a way to control Uzbekistan creating a bond of economic dependence<sup>86</sup>—the related ecological disaster (as the Aral Sea Basin drying up) and the last “repressions” during the Uzbek affair become typical *leitmotivs* in the implementation of *Mustaqillik*, leveraging on wounded proud of Uzbek people, coming “closer of all to classical forms of decolonization narratives.”<sup>87</sup>

### A post-colonial ideology for a post-Soviet state?

Thereafter, *Mustaqillik* and its self-victimizing *pars destruens* served to positively legitimate Karimov’s regime and undergird its stability, endorsing independence from USSR through a post-colonial-like narrative. However, these analytical categories can lead to misleading conclusions, considering the level of involvement of the Uzbek SSR within the Soviet machine and the fact that most Uzbeks—especially the elite groups—still refrain from considering themselves post-colonized. This lack of consensus over historical memory is due to the high levels of fragmentation within Uzbek society—divided among social classes, ethnic groups, power network (clans), religion and regional cleavages—and to the general involvement of the Uzbek elite itself in the former nomenklatura. Indeed, the Soviet “colonial system” was implemented by the same local intelligentsia that, some years later, led the country towards independence. This underscores the absence of the typical social tensions between colonizers and indigenes in a country where Russian communities were fewer in number than in other parts of the empire. This aspect demonstrates why—compared with the Baltic or Caucasus republics—cultural desovietization and nationalization processes in Uzbekistan was so peaceful. Furthermore, the shift to *Mustaqillik* was even responding to the need to compensate for an identity trauma from loss of status. During Soviet times, Uzbeks perceived their identity-status as inextricably linked to the more general nuclear superpower status of the USSR. In this sense, there is also a sort of nostalgia for the Soviet era. Even if it is pointless to compare the history of such different contexts as Soviet Central Asia and decolonized countries, this article has sought to bridge the literature gap on *pars destruens* by arguing how the rhetorical use of a post-colonial narrative is still

---

86. See: Asat Niyazovich Abdullaev, “Òzbekistonda Paxta Yakkahokimligi va Uning Oqibat-lari (1917-1991 Y.y.)” 219.

87. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later,” 89.

effective in legitimizing the current regime at domestic and international levels, as for the recent ambitions of Uzbekistan in the third world block. In this field, a decolonization narrative somehow works.

Furthermore, *Mustaqillik* was appropriate to propose Uzbekistan as a “post-Soviet” entity. This common label is generally used for the 15 republics of the FSU and, sometimes, even for those non-USSR countries that were part of the communist bloc that have become new democracies. Concerning Uzbekistan, it is necessary to disaggregate this concept, analyzing the presence and the effectiveness of a transition from Soviet that can justify the “post” label. In fact, at a political level, opposition was endorsed in an ornamental form, and the role of the security service remained strong in ruling and controlling the state. Furthermore, the ruling elite of Republic of Uzbekistan came directly from the Soviet cadres. From this perspective, the political claim that wants to find a “colonial” pattern of power would necessarily discuss the legitimacy of these institutions, of social and human capital and even the status of the current elite groups. Also the social services pillars—such as pensions, welfare state, free education and healthcare—and the institutions of Republic of Uzbekistan were forged on Soviet patterns as also the Academy of Sciences, the KGB (renamed SNB), the unions, the youth organizations, the government institutions and powers etc.; as even the economic system that remained mainly monopolistic and based on extensive exploitation of natural resources. Modernization and secularism<sup>88</sup> were kept as pillars of the Uzbek state; the role of Russian language, symbols and culture remained as the main cultural platform among elite groups and it seems that the positive opinions about USSR are still higher in Central Asia than in other FSU Republics<sup>89</sup> revealing how 1991 was more a formal—rather than substantial—date.

Once we exclude the evidence of political, economic, institutional and even cultural evolutions in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, we can easily conclude that the post-Soviet transition was immediately effective—at least at an ideological level. Therefore, the ideological shift—from *kommunizm* to *Mustaqillik*—is the unique strong element that could justify the idea of “post,” and the self-victimization narrative had a strong role in the abovementioned process of *trasformismo*. Most likely, although the government in Tashkent has significantly endorsed this post-Soviet version, the Uzbek leadership was not successful in endorsing a publicly shared “post-colonial trauma”; meanwhile, the repression narrative remains a sensitive topic only for those generations of Uzbeks who lived the “Gdlian-Ivanov terror” period. This issue is realistically too recent to be reconsidered and, probably, also the new President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev will not undertake relevant moves to shift the Karimovian narrative in the short term.

To conclude, Uzbekistan and the Uzbek people remain divided in judging the Soviet experience in general, and the cotton affairs—one of the most sensitive topics

---

88. Sébastien Peyrouse, “La gestion du fait religieux en Asie centrale: poursuite du cadre conceptuel soviétique et renouveau factice,” *Cahiers d’Asie Centrale*, 13-14 (2004): 77-120.

89. Abashin, “Nations and Post-Colonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later,” 97.

of their contemporary history—in particular. These contradictions—in analyzing an issue that remains sensitive in both Russia and Uzbekistan—are indicative of the complexity of an as yet unresolved issue. An overall evaluation of the Soviet experience in Central Asia that can be shared by both Russians, who have perhaps most suffered and invested in the Soviet utopia, and Uzbeks, who still struggle to assert their own cultural identity devoid from past Soviet experience, remains elusive. Thus, the purpose of further research is to analyze the period of perestroika from the perspective of additional cases on the periphery, defining other social, economic, political and cultural elements that characterized the traumatic transition to independent national statehood.

*Postdoctoral research fellow at The International Centre  
for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences  
National Research University Higher School of Economics*

*rcucciolla@hse.ru*

