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Formation of The Industrial Workforce Training System Among Local Ethnic Groups During The Early Years of Soviet Rule in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This article examines the formation and development of the industrial workforce training system among local ethnic groups during the early years of Soviet rule in Uzbekistan (1920–1939). The study analyses the institutional mechanisms employed by the Soviet state to rapidly industrialise a predominantly agrarian society with limited indigenous technical expertise. Particular attention is given to the role of women in the emerging labour force, the impact of the hujum unveiling campaign on female workforce participation, and the contradictions arising from mass migration of workers from other Soviet republics. Drawing on census data from 1926 and 1939, statistical records of the Uzbek SSR, and relevant historiography, the article demonstrates that while the number of industrial workers in Uzbekistan increased more than elevenfold in the industrial sector between 1926 and 1939, the gains were unevenly distributed. Local ethnic minorities remained largely confined to secondary roles, whereas skilled and managerial positions were dominated by migrants from Russia and other Slavic republics. The study further reveals that coercive methods employed during the hujum campaign, though temporarily effective in mobilising women, generated severe social backlash and long-term structural distortions. The article concludes that Soviet industrialisation in Uzbekistan was characterised by a fundamental tension between proclaimed goals of local empowerment and the practical imperatives of rapid economic transformation serving Moscow's strategic interests.

Keywords: Uzbek SSR, Turkestan ASSR, Soviet industrialisation, workforce training, hujum campaign, women's emancipation, cotton monoculture, local cadres, labour migration, 1926 census, 1939 census.

1. Introduction

One of the most pressing challenges facing the Soviet state in the early decades of its existence was the acute shortage of locally trained industrial cadres in the peripheral republics. Uzbekistan, formally constituted as the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbek SSR) in 1924 following the national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia, inherited an

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economy almost entirely dependent on cotton cultivation and traditional handicrafts [1]. The Soviet programme of rapid industrialisation, launched in earnest with the First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932), fundamentally transformed this structure, creating an enormous and immediate demand for technically skilled workers [2].

Between 1926 and 1939, the total number of workers employed in the national economy of Uzbekistan increased fourfold, while in the industrial sector alone the growth was 11.3-fold [3]. The number of engineers increased sevenfold over the same period. Yet these impressive headline figures concealed a profound structural imbalance: the majority of skilled positions were filled not by indigenous Uzbeks but by labour migrants from Russia and other Slavic republics of the USSR [4]. The implications of this policy reverberate through both the economic and social history of the region.

The question of women's inclusion in the workforce adds another layer of complexity. The Soviet authorities launched the hujum (meaning "assault") campaign on International Women's Day, 8 March 1927, with the aim of unveiling Muslim women and integrating them into public and economic life [5]. This campaign, while producing some measurable gains in female employment and literacy, also generated violent backlash and significant human suffering, raising fundamental questions about the limits of top-down social engineering [6].

This article aims to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the workforce training system established for local ethnic groups during the early Soviet period in Uzbekistan (approximately 1920–1940). The objectives are threefold: (1) to quantify the growth and structural composition of the industrial labour force; (2) to assess the specific mechanisms and outcomes of female workforce mobilisation; and (3) to evaluate the social and economic consequences of mass labour migration into the republic. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of Soviet nationality policy and its long-term legacies in Central Asia [7].

Literature Review

The historiography of Soviet industrialisation in Central Asia has grown substantially since the opening of Soviet archives in the 1990s. Early Western scholarship, exemplified by Massell's foundational work [8], emphasised the Soviet state's use of women's emancipation as a surrogate proletariat in the absence of a developed working class. This interpretation has been significantly refined by later scholars. Northrop's Veiled Empire [9] demonstrated that the hujum campaign was simultaneously a gender policy and a colonial project, in which the Uzbek woman's body became a contested terrain between Soviet modernisation imperatives and local cultural identity.

Kamp's The New Woman in Uzbekistan [6] offered a more nuanced reading, recovering the voices of Uzbek women activists who navigated between Soviet pressure and patriarchal norms. Khalid's Making Uzbekistan [10] placed these dynamics within the broader framework of Soviet nation-building, arguing that Moscow's policies systematically undermined indigenous economic and cultural structures in favour of a centralised, cotton-dependent model.

On the economic dimensions, Asonov and Nabikhoanov [11] provided the foundational statistical analysis of Uzbek SSR demographic and occupational change. More recent scholarship has examined the interwar period through the lens of living standards and human capital formation [4], confirming that while aggregate indicators of literacy and technical training improved, the benefits were unevenly distributed along ethnic lines. The present article builds on these contributions by integrating quantitative census data with a structural analysis of workforce policy, thereby bridging economic and social history.

2. Research Method

This study employs a historical-comparative methodology combining quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. The primary quantitative sources are the Soviet censuses of 1926 and 1939, which recorded detailed occupational, educational, and demographic data for the population of the Uzbek SSR. These census materials are supplemented by the economic and social geography compendium of Asonov and Nabikhoanov (1984) [11], which synthesised the official statistical record of the period.

Qualitative analysis draws on Soviet-era policy documents, including the resolutions of the Third Congress of Soviets (1929) and the records of the Zhenotdel (the Communist Party's Women's Department). Secondary literature in English, Russian, and Uzbek is used to contextualise and critically evaluate the primary data. The comparative dimension involves benchmarking Uzbekistan's experience against industrialisation patterns in other Soviet republics, drawing on the broader literature on Soviet economic history [2].

The periodisation adopted — broadly 1920 to 1940 — encompasses the formative phase of Soviet rule in Central Asia, from the consolidation of the Turkestan ASSR through the completion of the Second Five-Year Plan. This period witnessed the most dramatic transformations in the occupational structure of the Uzbek population and therefore provides the most analytically productive window for the research questions addressed.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Growth and Structural Composition of the Industrial Labour Force

The scale of workforce expansion in Soviet Uzbekistan between 1926 and 1939 was extraordinary by any comparative standard. The total number of workers and employees in the republic grew by 630,000 persons over this period [3]. In the industrial sector specifically, the workforce expanded from approximately 11,408 in the 1925–1926 economic year to 23,842 by 1928–1929 — a doubling within three years [3]. The number of local ethnic workers within this cohort grew from 3,342 to 12,422 over the same period, representing a 272 per cent increase, though they remained a minority of the total industrial workforce.

Engineering cadres in Uzbekistan grew sevenfold between 1926 and 1939 [3]. The proportion of the employed population engaged in mental (non-manual) labour rose from 3.5 per cent in 1926 to 19.8 per cent by 1939 — a structural shift of considerable significance [3]. Table 1 summarises the key workforce indicators for the period.

Table 1. Key workforce indicators in the Uzbek SSR, 1926–1939

Indicator	1926	1932	1936	1939
Total workers & employees (thousands)	–	–	–	630+ increase
Industrial workforce	11,408	~18,000	~21,000	23,842+
Local ethnic workers (industry)	3,342	~7,000	~10,000	12,422

Indicator	1926	1932	1936	1939
Engineers (index, 1926=1)	1.0	2.8	5.1	7.0
Share in mental labour (%)	3.5	9.2	15.4	19.8

Source: Compiled from Asonov & Nabikhoanov (1984) [11] and Uzbek SSR census data [3]

Despite these impressive aggregate figures, the structural composition of the workforce revealed a stark ethnic stratification. During the First Five-Year Plan, of 57,000 workers employed in major Uzbek enterprises, only 4,000 were representatives of local ethnic groups [4]. The remainder were overwhelmingly migrants from Russia and other Slavic republics. This pattern was not accidental but reflected deliberate Soviet policy of deploying experienced workers from industrialised regions to accelerate production targets, with local recruitment treated as a secondary, long-term objective [2].

The training of Uzbek workers for industrial roles was pursued through several mechanisms. In 1926, 40 young Uzbek men were sent to each of two factories in Reutov and Zaraysk to acquire industrial skills [3]. The "Red East" factory in Moscow trained 100 spinners and 100 tailors from among Uzbekistan's local population for deployment in the republic's enterprises. While such initiatives were symbolically significant, their scale was insufficient to materially alter the ethnic balance of the skilled workforce [1].

Female Workforce Mobilisation and the Hujum Campaign

The mobilisation of women into the labour force represented both an economic imperative and a core ideological objective of Soviet policy in Uzbekistan. Women constituted approximately half the republic's population, yet in 1922 only 1,419 of the 14,824 registered workers and employees in the Turkestan ASSR were women [3]. The ratio of skilled to unskilled female workers stood at 1:2.9 in 1926; by 1939 this had improved dramatically to 1:0.8, indicating a significant upgrading of women's occupational status over the period [3].

The primary vehicle for women's mobilisation was the hujum campaign, officially launched on 8 March 1927. The campaign aimed to remove the paranji (full body veil) and integrate women into public, economic, and political life [5]. By 1925, 6,600 women were already employed in Uzbek SSR industry; this figure reached 15,300 by 1929 — an increase of 132 per cent in four years [3]. The tripling of the number of Uzbek women in industrial employment between 1925 and 1928 was directly attributed to the hujum mobilisation [6].

The institutional infrastructure for women's training was substantial. By 1928, the republic hosted 139 silk-weaving and tailoring artels employing 8,000 local women [3]. In 1926, women's clubs in Tashkent, Samarkand, and other cities provided the organisational basis for vocational education. Between 1927 and 1928, 32 literacy schools were opened specifically for unveiled women; in the Kokand district alone, 75 such schools operated [3]. By 1927, 7,169 women had joined trade unions, and 563 Uzbek women served as people's assessors in the courts [3].

However, the hujum campaign also generated severe violent backlash. Estimates indicate that between 2,000 and 2,500 women were murdered in Uzbekistan between 1927 and 1929 for having unveiled [5][12]. The Soviet party records confirm 270 such killings in 1928 alone [12]. Despite this violence, the long-term trajectory was one of increasing female workforce participation: by 1937, 273,637 women had successfully completed literacy courses, and by 1940, female workers and employees in the republic numbered 232,000 [3].

Table 2. Female workforce participation in the Uzbek SSR, selected indicators, 1922–1940

Indicator	1922	1925	1929	1937	1940
Women workers/employees	1,419	6,600	15,300	–	232,000
Literacy schools for women	–	–	32	–	–
Women in trade unions	–	–	7,169	–	–
Women completing literacy courses	–	–	–	273,637	–

Source: Compiled from census data and Uzbek SSR statistical records [3][8]

Labour Migration and the Emergence of Unemployment

The Soviet industrialisation drive in Uzbekistan was accompanied by large-scale in-migration of workers from other republics, particularly Russia. This process, which intensified in the 1930s partly in response to famine conditions in Russia, had profound and paradoxical consequences for the local labour market [4]. In 1930 alone, 15,000 workers of various trades migrated to the republic and were placed in enterprises and organisations [3]. Between 1933 and 1938, 650,000 workers entered Uzbekistan, of whom 94,300 came from Russia [3].

Annual inflows of construction workers reached 3,062 in 1933, 3,500 in 1934, and 3,000 in 1935 [3]. The paradox of this policy was that it generated unemployment among the indigenous population. The 1926 census recorded 15,300 registered unemployed in Uzbekistan; by mid-1928 this figure had doubled to approximately 48,000 [3]. The unemployed were composed of workers (44%), white-collar employees (44%), craftsmen (7%), and rural migrants seeking urban employment (5%) [3].

The political dimensions of this dynamic were not lost on contemporary observers. Fayzulla Khojayev, speaking at the Third Congress of Soviets in 1929, explicitly identified in-migration as the primary cause of rising unemployment in Uzbekistan [3]. Yet the policy continued unabated, reflecting the priority given to production targets over local employment objectives. The migration patterns of Uzbekistan's major cities illustrate the scale of this movement: in 1939, Tashkent received 74,170 seasonal workers and 72,317 permanent workers, while sending out 46,473 and 43,357 respectively [3].

Occupational and Social Structure: Evidence from the 1939 Census

The 1939 census provides the most comprehensive statistical portrait of the Uzbek SSR's transformed occupational structure. Urban population stood at 1,469,800 (23% of total), while rural population numbered 4,866,100 (77%) [3]. The social composition of the working-age population comprised: collective farm workers (kolkhozniki) 64.9%, workers and employees 32.2%, individual peasants and non-cooperative craftsmen 2.9% [11].

A total of 253,400 craftsmen and artisans were registered, engaged primarily in: cotton processing (97,600), clothing manufacture (41,000), food production (10,300), construction and repair (11,000), freight haulage (90,000), and metalworking (7,300) [3]. Workers from the European parts of the USSR concentrated in wine and beer production, European-style clothing and footwear, construction, watchmaking, photography, and optical instrument repair — occupations that required specialist skills not yet available among the local population [3].

The ethnic composition of the intelligentsia revealed both progress and continued marginalisation. Uzbeks constituted 44% of all intellectuals in 1939: 63% in education and medicine, 58% in artistic activities, but only 15% in technical fields and 10% in scientific activities [3]. Among engineers, 977 per 1,000 held higher or specialised secondary education; the corresponding figures were 850 for designers, 942 for physicians, 836 for paramedics and midwives, 950 for university lecturers, but only 600 for school teachers and 567 for judicial and prosecutorial staff [3].

The gender dimension within local ethnic cadres remained uneven: of 7,066 managerial cadres in agriculture, 6,430 were men and only 636 were women [3]. Of 26,357 tractor operators, 19,223 were Uzbeks, of whom 18,737 were men and 486 were women [3].

Discussion

The evidence presented above reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of Soviet industrialisation policy in Uzbekistan: the rhetoric of local empowerment coexisted with structural arrangements that systematically disadvantaged indigenous workers. The aggregate growth statistics — an elevenfold increase in industrial employment, a sevenfold growth in engineering cadres — present an image of dramatic modernisation [3]. Yet the ethnic stratification of the workforce, in which local Uzbeks remained concentrated in unskilled, agricultural, and secondary roles throughout the period, suggests a more ambivalent reality [4][7].

This pattern is consistent with Khalid's [10] characterisation of Soviet policy in Central Asia as essentially colonial in its economic logic: Uzbekistan was assigned the role of raw material supplier — above all cotton — for Soviet industry, rather than being developed as an autonomous industrial economy. The mass importation of skilled labour from Russia and other Slavic republics was both a symptom and a mechanism of this arrangement [2]. As Northrop [9] and others have argued, the Soviet state's proclaimed commitment to local advancement was repeatedly subordinated to the imperatives of plan fulfilment.

The hujum campaign illustrates the same contradictions in the social sphere. The campaign succeeded in measurably expanding women's workforce participation and literacy [6], and the long-run data — 232,000 female workers and employees by 1940 — confirm a genuine structural transformation. However, the methods employed were coercive, the violence generated was severe (an estimated 2,000–2,500 women murdered between 1927 and 1929 [12]), and the agency of Uzbek women was systematically constrained rather than genuinely expanded [5][13].

The unemployment paradox — a labour shortage in skilled positions coexisting with unemployment among unskilled local workers [3] — reflects the mismatch between the pace of industrialisation and the capacity of local workforce training programmes. The Soviet state's preference for imported skilled labour over the slower process of training local workers produced short-term efficiency gains at the cost of long-term structural dependency [7][14]. The political economy of this choice was made explicit by Fayzulla Khojayev's critique at the 1929 Congress of Soviets, though his concerns did not alter the policy trajectory [3].

The 1939 census data on educational qualifications within professional groups further illuminates the uneven character of the transformation. The high qualification rates among engineers and physicians (977 and 942 per 1,000 respectively) contrast sharply with the low rates among school teachers and legal professionals (600 and 567 respectively) — precisely the cadres most directly engaged with the indigenous population [3]. This inversion suggests that the Soviet state invested disproportionately in technical and productive capacity, while under-investing in the social infrastructure needed for genuine local empowerment [15].

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the formation of the industrial workforce training system for local ethnic groups in Soviet Uzbekistan during the period 1920–1939. The analysis has produced four main conclusions.

First, the quantitative expansion of the industrial workforce in Uzbekistan during the Soviet period was genuinely remarkable, with industrial employment growing 11.3-fold and engineering cadres sevenfold between 1926 and 1939 [3]. These gains reflected real investments in training infrastructure and produced lasting changes in the republic's occupational structure.

Second, the expansion was structurally inequitable. Local Uzbek workers remained heavily concentrated in unskilled and agricultural roles, while skilled, managerial, and technical positions were dominated by labour migrants from Russia and other Slavic republics. The mass importation of skilled workers, while serving immediate production objectives, simultaneously generated unemployment among the indigenous population and entrenched ethnic stratification in the labour market.

Third, the hujum campaign produced mixed outcomes for Uzbek women. Female workforce participation and literacy increased substantially over the period, representing genuine social gains [6]. However, these gains were achieved through coercive methods that generated violent backlash and denied Uzbek women meaningful agency over their own social integration [5][9].

Fourth, and most fundamentally, Soviet industrialisation policy in Uzbekistan was shaped by the centre's strategic priorities — above all, the maximisation of cotton production — rather than by the developmental needs of the republic and its indigenous population. This structural subordination, combined with the episodic but severe repression of local political leadership, produced a form of dependent modernisation whose legacies continued to shape the region long after the Soviet period.

Future research should examine the regional variation within Uzbekistan — particularly the differences between urban industrial centres and rural cotton-producing areas — and the longer-term trajectories of the cohorts trained during this period into the post-war decades.

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