

FEATURES OF TEACHING THE “COTTON AFFAIR” REPRESSION

J. Mustafayev

PhD, Associate Professor, Navoi State University

In the 1980s, as the Soviet Union faced an economic crisis, the decline of its centralized planned economy, and growing political instability, the central authorities launched a series of campaigns aimed at concealing these systemic problems. Among these campaigns, the “Cotton Affair” became one of the most extensive and consequential. As Kh. Yunusova notes, this campaign was designed to portray the causes of the economic downturn as the “fault” of the union republics, thereby deflecting political responsibility away from the Center¹.

Therefore, when teaching this topic, it is essential to explain to students—on a scientific and analytical basis—its nature as a form of political manipulation. The Soviet Union, prioritizing the interests of its administrative-command system, pursued a policy of directing the economic structures of the union republics toward narrowly defined sectors. The policy implemented by the CPSU was particularly harsh toward the Turkic-speaking peoples. Through this approach, the Center imposed annual production plans that exceeded realistic limits on these republics.

Unlike its approach toward the Slavic republics, including Belarus and Ukraine, the CPSU pursued a distinctly different policy toward Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. As a result of this discriminatory policy, the socio-economic systems of these republics, pressured from above by rigid central directives, gradually deviated from their natural developmental trajectories and entered a phase of systemic decline. In Uzbekistan, the establishment of cotton monoculture meant that the Center demanded a sharp and continuous increase in cotton yields year after year. Under the coercive influence of the Communist Party, five-year plans were implemented in a way that led to the premature exploitation of land, the destruction of the soil’s meliorative condition, the repetitive cultivation of the same crops, and the incurrence of high financial expenditures. However, these expenditures did not justify themselves, while the demand to fulfill the cotton production plan continued to grow.

Consequently, actual revenues remained insufficient, and administrative coercion, strict control, and systemic pressure intensified. Shortages, theft, and the absence of an effective system of internal monitoring and accounting became increasingly widespread. These conditions across the country ultimately contributed to the proliferation of the practice known as “overreporting”². According to the researcher Kh. Yunusova, the Soviet leadership attributed the severe crises occurring within the USSR not to the flawed policies of the Communist Party, but rather to so-called “negative phenomena” emerging in society, and for this reason turned Uzbekistan into a testing ground for political experimentation. The repressive campaign carried out in Uzbekistan, under the pretext of combating criminality and eliminating the practice of overreporting in the economic sector, in reality aimed to harshly punish local officials, keep the national intelligentsia confined within the “mold of communism,” suppress their aspirations for independence, and present this approach as an instructive model for other regions.

¹ Юнусова Х. Ўзбекистонда совет давлатининг миллий сиёсати ва унинг оқибатлари (XX аср 80 -йиллари мисолида). –Тошкент: Zar qalam, 2005. –Б.65

² Авлиёкулова Д. Совет ҳокимиятининг Ўзбекистондаги қатағон сиёсати ва унинг оқибатлари (XX аср 20-80 йиллари Жанубий вилоятлар мисолида). Тарих фанлари бўйича фалсафа доктори (PhD) дисс. ... – Қарши: 2022. –Б.98

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Global Horizons in Philology and Pedagogy: Experiences of Turkic Nations” September 25, 2025

It should be emphasized that this coercive policy of the CPSU Central Committee was implemented not only in Uzbekistan, but also in neighboring republics, including Turkmenistan. For example, on 7–8 April 1986, a republican seminar was held in the city of Ashgabat under the title “Strengthening the fight against overreporting, theft, bribery, and other violations in the procurement and processing of raw cotton, and ensuring strict adherence to socialist legality in the investigation of such cases³. At the seminar, A. Abramov, Prosecutor of the Department for Oversight of Investigation and Inquiry within the Internal Affairs Bodies of the Main Investigative Directorate of the USSR Prosecutor’s Office and Senior Counselor of Justice, delivered a lecture entitled “On Establishing Prosecutorial Oversight of the Implementation of Laws by Investigative Bodies in Initiating and Investigating Cases of Overreporting, Theft, Bribery, and Other Crimes in the Procurement and Processing of Raw Cotton, and on Increasing the Efficiency of the Investigative Apparatus⁴.

N. Shagabutdinov, Deputy Head of the Prosecutorial Oversight Department of the Prosecutor’s Office of the Uzbek SSR, who was invited to the seminar as a guest, provided recommendations to his Turkmen colleagues on methods of prosecutorial supervision for detecting and preventing theft, bribery, and other crimes in the procurement and processing of raw cotton⁵. The fact that officials who had gained considerable experience in Uzbekistan provided instructions on the use of scientific and technical tools in criminal investigations, the application of scientific recommendations, and the exercise of prosecutorial oversight over the lawful use of such methods, demonstrates that certain aspects of the Soviet regime’s repressive policy were also implemented in Turkmenistan⁶.

The fact that the investigative processes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were carried out according to an identical scenario represents another important aspect of the topic. This allows students to understand that a unified repressive mechanism had been developed by the Center and practically imposed across the union republics. The special seminar held in Ashgabat in April 1986—during which investigators from Moscow and Tashkent provided Turkmen investigative bodies with “instructions” as a form of practical demonstration, and identical investigative methods were introduced throughout the republics—clearly confirms that the entire campaign was orchestrated as a political directive⁷. This, in turn, enables students to grasp not only historical facts but also the Center’s broader regional political strategies.

One of the key methodological principles in teaching the “Cotton Affair” is a systematic approach. The repressive campaign must be explained not merely as a matter of judicial and investigative practice, but in connection with the distortion of economic policy, the artificial inflation of production quotas, the ecological and human pressures associated with cotton cultivation, and the manipulation of statistical reporting by the Center. This is necessary because the campaign emerged not only as a legal phenomenon but also as an economic and socio-political one. According to the Center’s own data, the sharp escalation of cotton production targets—set without regard for the actual economic capacity of the republics—further deepened the crisis of the Soviet planned economy. This scholarly foundation enables students to understand the economic roots of the repression.

Another important aspect of teaching this topic is ideological analysis. During those years, the

³ Current Archive of the Museum of Remembrance of the Victims of Repression within the Navoi State Pedagogical Institute. Collection of Materials Related to the “Cotton Affair” Repression, p. 30.

⁴ Uzbekistan National Archive, Fund R-1710, Inventory 13, File 1425, folio 62.

⁵ Current Archive of the Museum of Remembrance of the Victims of Repression within Bukhara State University.

⁶ Uzbekistan National Archive, Fund R-1710, Inventory 13, File 1425, folio 63.

⁷ Current Archive of the Museum of Remembrance of the Victims of Repression within the Navoi State Pedagogical Institute. Collection of Materials Related to the “Cotton Affair” Repression, folio 30.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Global Horizons in Philology and Pedagogy: Experiences of Turkic Nations” September 25, 2025

Soviet press provided political justification for the campaign through slogans such as “overreporting,” “administrative negligence,” and “criminality among local officials.” Through its role in creating stereotypes, the press cultivated an atmosphere of distrust toward the union republics within public consciousness. Demonstrating this process to students, analyzing texts with them, and encouraging reflection on the ideological and propagandistic layers of the repression carry significant educational and scholarly value.

Another methodological feature of teaching the topic is explaining the psychological and social mechanisms of pressure within the investigative system. The investigative methods employed by the Gdlyan–Ivanov group—including prolonged interrogations, compelling witnesses to testify under psychological pressure, and unjustly linking the accused into an expanding “chain of criminality”—expose the repressive nature of Soviet investigative policy. Studying this process allows students to analyze issues such as legal consciousness, fair judicial procedures, and violations of human rights.

Within the teaching process, an in-depth method of working with documentary sources also holds a central place. According to archival materials of the USSR Prosecutor’s Office, the campaign involved more than 340 investigators, 150 auditors, and over 48 special operational groups⁸. These figures demonstrate that the process was not a natural legal procedure but rather an artificially expanded political operation. Working with statistical data—comparing them across regions and analyzing the discrepancies in the number of individuals prosecuted—strengthens students’ critical thinking during the learning process.

Another distinctive aspect of teaching this topic is the comparative approach. Showing that the campaign unfolded according to an identical scenario in both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan broadens students’ regional analytical perspective. For example, the Ashgabat seminar, the investigative methods applied to Turkmen officials fully mirroring those used in Uzbekistan, and the Center’s attempts to replicate an identically constructed “criminal scheme” across the republics all illustrate that Soviet policy relied on a mechanical and uniform mode of implementation⁹. Through comparative analysis, students come to understand that the Soviet Center viewed the republics through a uniform ideological lens, depicting each of them as entities responsible for carrying the burden of the system’s overall failures.

Another important instructional aspect of the topic is the analysis of the psychological atmosphere within society. During the years of repression, a pervasive climate of fear, suspicion, and distrust spread throughout Uzbekistan, and this must be illuminated in the teaching process. To explain this phenomenon, factors such as the social isolation of families of the convicted, the absence of information sources beyond official channels, the emergence of mechanisms of public “accusation boards,” and the artificial shaping of public opinion are examined. These psychological dimensions enable students to develop a deeper understanding of how totalitarian systems influence human consciousness.

Additionally, an essential component of teaching the “Cotton Affair” is the analysis of the post-repressive period. Between 1989 and 1991, the issuance of acquittals in many cases, the exposure of the baseless nature of numerous investigative materials, the sharp criticism directed at the Gdlyan–Ivanov group, and the open acknowledgment that the campaign had been a political order from the Center all underscore for students the importance of scholarly re-

⁸ Uzbekistan National Archive, Fund R-1710, Inventory 13, File 1425, folio 31.

⁹ Uzbekistan National Archive, Fund R-1710, Inventory 13, File 1425, folio 63.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“Global Horizons in Philology and Pedagogy: Experiences of Turkic Nations”September 25, 2025

evaluation of historical processes. Studying the post-repressive period helps students develop competencies for distinguishing historical truth from the ideological constructs of the Soviet era.

In conclusion, the distinctive features of teaching the “Cotton Affair” lie in conveying its multilayered political, legal, economic, ideological, and social dimensions to students through systematic, comparative, documentary, and critical approaches. This method strengthens not only students’ historical knowledge but also their political awareness, legal culture, and critical thinking skills, ultimately contributing to the formation of a responsible civic outlook in the era of independence.