

INTERETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE FERGHANA REGION AND THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THEIR EMERGENCE

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Abstract

With the help of primary sources, periodicals and scientific literature, the article analyses the inter-ethnic conflicts that took place in the Fergana region in the last years of Soviet power and the reasons for these inter-ethnic problems.

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The form of colonial rule based on the Soviet Union's long-standing domination, coupled with the government's failure to account for the political, economic, social, climatic, national, and other specific characteristics of various regions, ultimately led to constraints and tensions in all spheres of societal development. The Fergana Valley has the highest population density in the republic. For example, if we analyze population growth in Fergana Region alone, in 1979 the region's population amounted to 1,149.4 thousand persons (66.3 percent), whereas in 1989 it reached 1,451 thousand (67.4 percent) [1]. It is evident that the region's population grew at a faster rate than in other regions. Consequently, foodstuffs necessary for daily consumption became scarce, and both land and housing diminished. By the late 1980s, in Fergana Region there were 292 persons per square kilometer [2]. This was not only the highest figure in the republic but in the entire Soviet Union. Naturally, this situation created significant difficulties in meeting the population's housing needs.

One month prior to the bloody tragedy in Fergana, i.e., in 1988, local authorities received over 70 thousand petitions and complaints, the majority of which concerned housing provision. For example, S. Alimbayeva, a mother of five children living in the Komsomol' settlement of Fergana city, and her husband (seven persons in total) had been residing in a one-room dwelling of only 17 square meters. Only after this case failed to be resolved at the regional level did she appeal to the republican government, as a result of which her housing was expanded [3].

Under cotton monoculture in the Valley, not only was housing provision neglected, but all facets of socio-economic life deteriorated rapidly, and problems increased to the point where resolving them became difficult. In particular, due to the lack of any programs or long-term planning, as well as the hurried adoption of numerous decrees of various kinds during the "Perestroika" period without regard for implementing appropriate measures, attention was not given to the enforcement of these decrees. As a result, the already dire socio-economic situation in the region became much more serious. Among other issues, cotton was planted on 80–85 percent of the available land in Fergana Region. Excessive expansion of cotton fields sharply reduced the soil's ameliorative condition and natural fertility. Consequently, 66 percent of the arable land produced very low yields [4].

Although the unrest that initiated the Fergana tragedies in Kuvasoy arose from a domestic quarrel between Uzbek and Meskhetian Turk youth, its underlying essence was as follows: “At that time, apparently under directives from the center, many publications, television, and radio superficially covered the tragic events, labeling them with chauvinistic notions and limiting themselves solely to depicting the ‘horrific scenes,’” noted Uzbekistan’s first leader [4]. Indeed, “the sources and causes of this tragedy were much deeper. Socio-economic problems had accumulated and gone unresolved for years. For example, regarding the condition of the rural population—who constituted more than half of the population—multiple generations lived on the same small plot of land; people who lived on generously fertile land that could yield three harvests a year were becoming increasingly impoverished; national traditions and lifestyles were being suppressed and, in some places, entirely persecuted; under the single-minded focus on cotton, even the peasants cultivating that cotton could not earn sufficient income. Considering these factors, it becomes clear under what conditions these tragic events occurred, naturally” [6].

In the following years, disagreements between Meskhetian Turk youth and the local population intensified and attempted to exert influence in the area. Although security and law enforcement agencies, as well as leaders of regional party and government organizations, were aware of this, they neither took preventive measures nor implemented necessary remedies in a timely manner. In Kuvasoy city, disorder continued to escalate. A group of violent Meskhetian Turk youth treated local residents, especially the youth, with brutality. Led by M. V. Dursunov—nicknamed “Boss”—the group exerted complete control over the situation in Kuvasoy and even committed acts of violence against law enforcement agencies with impunity. As the Director General of the Kuvasoy Agro-Industrial Combine, X. Olimov, noted: “This ‘Boss,’ belonging to the Turk nation, truly was the ruler of Kuvasoy. Everyone, including police officers, feared him. After his death, his younger brother replaced him. One could not enter the city’s cinemas without permission. The rioters who organized fights near restaurants and beer houses around the theater were these same individuals. Police and other law enforcement officers took no measures against them; in many cases, they even assisted them. Over the years, among those punished for hooliganism, theft, or violating public order, none belonged to this very group. I condemn not the Meskhetian Turk people, but the actions of this group of hooligans” [7].

Regarding this criminal group’s leader, M. V. Dursunov (born in 1959), of Meskhetian Turk nationality, he was convicted several times and—under the nickname “Boss”—continuously instigated disorder, discriminated against local nationalities, and trampled on their rights. Furthermore, he committed criminal acts around Kuvasoy and exercised control over city cafes, beer bars, and household service facilities, extorting large sums of money in return. Law enforcement agencies did not take any action against these activities; on the contrary, they became patrons of his group. For instance, it was noted that A. Sodiqov, an officer of the city’s Criminal Investigation Department, collaborated with him [8]. The group consisted mainly of young Meskhetian Turks, including Dursunov’s younger brother Rustam—convicted several times—and dangerous criminals named Fayzi and Nosir. According to contemporary press reports, in August 1988 M. V. Dursunov died in a car accident along with three members of his group. Following this, internal strife for leadership erupted within the criminal group [9]. At that time in Kuvasoy, a certain Marat Zololiddinov (with a Meskhetian Turk father and a Tatar mother), who was already notorious for several disorders, together with his associates regularly insulted local youth and instigated fights. His primary goal was to assume the role of the group’s “Boss.” On 16 May 1989, due to the disorder he caused at a bar near the station, Egamberdi Oripov, Anvar Muminov, and Sergey Boldunov were victimized. The next day, he and his accomplices seized A. Muminov near the station and beat him again; on 18 May they inflicted serious bodily harm on an Uzbek individual, with slogans such as “Beat the Uzbeks wearing doppi.” Regrettably, these criminal events were not recorded in the police log. Eyewitness S. Yoqubova reported the incident to the police by telephone, yet the police did not arrive at the scene. Over the years, the Kuvasoy Internal Affairs Department did not record a single case of a Meskhetian Turk being held accountable for disorderly conduct or criminal

activity. Similar minor clashes further sowed discord between the two nationalities and ultimately provoked ethnic conflict.

The incident in Kuvasoy began on 20 May with a minor quarrel between young people of Uzbek and Meskhetian Turk nationalities. On 23 May the hostile situation repeated itself. Meskhetian Turk youth—who exercised full control over local service providers and restaurants—severely insulted many Uzbeks who visited these establishments. In response, Uzbek youth, seeking retribution, organized into groups and went to neighborhoods inhabited by Meskhetian Turks. On 23 May at approximately 7:30 pm, more than 200 youths gathered on the inner side of Budyonny Street. Despite the presence of police officers, a clash erupted between the two sides, resulting in six people being injured and hospitalized [10]. However, the dispute between the two groups did not end there, and no decisive measures were taken to prevent further escalation [11]. The following day, 24 May, at 11 am, nearly 200 Meskhetian Turks gathered in Lenin Square demanding resolution of their national grievances and punishment of those deemed responsible for the conflicts. In the same square, around 500 Uzbek youths also assembled. To prevent renewed clashes, police patrols and respected figures from both sides were deployed, and by 1:30 pm the crowd dispersed. However, around 7 pm, groups of Uzbek youth began to gather again in the square [12]. One of the respected Meskhetian Turk figures, Arslon Toshtanov, addressed the crowd, apologizing on behalf of his compatriots for their thoughtless actions. Subsequently, party and soviet officials spoke, calling for calm, the maintenance of order, and refraining from actions that would lead to tragic consequences. Yet these appeals failed to sufficiently influence the youth, who proceeded to the Temiryo'lichilar Street, where Meskhetian Turks resided. Approximately 150 residents of the Meskhetian Turk neighborhood gathered nearby, and a clash ensued. In this clash, 58 people were injured, of whom 32 were hospitalized. One of the victims, Ikrom Abdurakhmonov (born in 1969), a Tajik residing in the Valik village of Kuvasoy, died in the hospital [13]. However, subsequent circulated and doctored photographs and audio recordings claimed that a young Uzbek, rather than a Tajik, had died in the Kuvasoy events, indicating a deliberate motive: in the planned “interethnic confrontation” in the Fergana Valley, sparking conflict between more numerous Uzbeks and the small Meskhetian Turk minority would serve the intended goal more effectively than tensions between Tajiks and Meskhetian Turks. In sum, the causes of the Kuvasoy incident were complex [14]. The political leadership of the republic failed to properly and judiciously assess the complex situation; as a result, mass protests by the youth and interethnic conflicts occurred in various localities.

Ultimately, the true state of affairs was concealed from the public; as always, it was argued that revealing details would not harm leadership or interethnic relations. Had the perpetrators of the Kuvasoy tragedy been named and punished in a timely manner and the truth disclosed to the public, these incidents might have been prevented. Regrettably, the party bureaucracy's inertia and responsible leaders' failure to draw decisive conclusions and implement measures in time paved the way for the situation to worsen daily. As clear evidence, eight days after the incorporation of firearms into mass brawls between opposing groups in Kuvasoy—resulting in one death and dozens of injuries—the regional party committee bureau convened to address these disorders.

The commission formed by the Uzbekistan Communist Party Central Committee to investigate the Fergana tragedies characterized such inertia as follows: “These events resulted from serious shortcomings and errors committed by the regional party committee bureau, the regional executive committee, and the party, soviet, and law enforcement agencies” [15].

The governance authorities' failure over the years to resolve accumulated social and ecological problems in the region can also be regarded as one of the causes of these tragedies. By the late 1980s, Kuvasoy had become the most air-polluted area in the USSR. In 1987 alone, industrial enterprises emitted 44.5 thousand tons of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere [16]. Access to potable water, gas, radio, and telephone communications was in a deplorable state. Residents of the Kokilon, Toliq Muyon,

and Qaqir villages of Kuvasoy city had no access at all to gas, telephone, or clean drinking water. For many years, in the Fergana Valley's economy, the "A" sector (means of production) was not dominant; rather, the "B" sector (consumer goods) prevailed. In particular, by the mid-1980s, light industry accounted for 53.1 percent of production [17]. This remained a major obstacle to solving the population's employment problems.

It is noteworthy that Meskhetian Turks were active in Kuvasoy's socio-economic life. At the Kuvasoy Porcelain Factory, 233 Meskhetian Turks worked, and the factory's director, shop supervisors, and foremen were predominantly from this nationality [18]. Moreover, in the city's consumer goods society, 186 Turks were employed; the chief accountant, economists, store managers, and salespersons were mostly from this nationality. This information disproves the claim that Meskhetian Turks were engaged in "black-market work" [19]. Additionally, details of the tragedy in Kuvasoy were not promptly communicated to the general populace, which led to various rumors among the region's residents and further exacerbated the tragedy. However, attempts to artificially escalate the situation—using forged photographs and audio recordings regarding the Kuvasoy conflicts—poisoned public consciousness and contributed to the rapid spread of riots and bloody tragedies throughout the region.

Shortly after the bloody incidents in Kuvasoy, credible reports emerged that similar riots might occur in Toshloq. District leadership informed higher authorities accordingly. Nevertheless, preoccupied with the Kuvasoy events, many regional leaders and law enforcement officers failed to pay adequate attention to these reports. On 3–4 June 1989, the usually tranquil streets and squares of Toshloq were filled with crowds of youth and adolescents. Among them, unfamiliar individuals appeared who, addressing the gathering, attempted to reinterpret the Kuvasoy events, distributing various photographs and falsely presenting themselves as eyewitnesses. However, through the efforts of volunteers and the public, such agitators were driven away. The following day, Sunday, the situation again took a sharp turn: two groups numbering many thousands gathered only 200 meters apart, armed with sticks, metal rods, knives, and axes. They proclaimed themselves acting in the name of the people. By that time, the district party committee building had become a sanctuary for Meskhetian Turks: following a serious threat, around 700 Meskhetian Turks had been relocated there [20]. The former first secretary of the district party committee, O. Sobirov, and the former chairman of the executive committee, A. Hojimurodov, addressed the crowd, urging reason and caution in order to avoid actions that would dishonor the Uzbek people [21]. Nevertheless, the crowd demanded the release of those detained for alleged crimes in the previous mutiny, threatening to storm the district party committee building and massacre the Meskhetian Turks if their demands were not met. Subsequently, four people from among the locals entered the police station with second secretary V. Ya. Danilov, but none of their suspects were found there [22].

Because their demands were not satisfied, the crowd again gathered in front of the district party committee building with new demands. To reconcile the situation and prevent a massacre, O. Sobirov spoke to the crowd, but his words proved ineffective, and the situation became increasingly dire, ultimately resulting in the sacrifice of innocent lives. Regarding the echo of the Kuvasoy conflict in Toshloq, the former first secretary of the district party committee, O. Sobirov, explained: "I believe there are many causes of the bloody events. These causes require in-depth investigation; it is not correct to seek them only within Toshloq district. Firstly, the events that occurred in Kuvasoy half a month earlier, along with their origins and perpetrators, remained undisclosed, leading to the spread of rumors, inflaming people's national sentiments, and intensifying anger" [23]. Unfortunately, at the onset of these events, district party and governance bodies displayed negligence. It was known that even before the Fergana tragedy, the district's population had raised several social and ecological issues and held demonstrations. Two days before these events began, the "Oq oltin" collective farm's residents in Qaqir village submitted a petition to the executive committee regarding the lack of gas, the breakdown of telephone communications, and the unsuitability of drinking water [24]. Moreover, demonstrations held on 3–4 June began in a similar manner, and clandestine forces exploited these circumstances for their

own interests.

In Toshloq, forged photographs depicting atrocities—such as children being beaten or girls' honor violated—were distributed by “messengers” moving from village to village, despite no such events having actually taken place [25]. Additionally, those spreading these reports were not prevented from presenting the events as real, which ultimately led ordinary people to follow their lead. As a result, in Toshloq district—home to representatives of more than 18 nationalities—ignorance, bloodlust, and human degradation prevailed instead of humanity and interethnic kindness. Some of the consequences of this tragedy were as follows: by 5 June, with assistance from internal affairs troops and local residents, 1 000 Meskhetian Turks in the district had been placed in a refugee camp. By the same date, 16 people—11 Meskhetian Turks and 5 Uzbeks—had been killed; a total of 462 people had been investigated, 20 detained, and 4 arrested; 46 people had been hospitalized with various injuries [26].

By 12 June, the outcomes of the tragedy in Toshloq district were as follows: all 192 Meskhetian Turk families—163 living in private houses and 29 in communal dwellings—had damaged homes. Among them, 171 houses were damaged, 43 of which were burned. Medical assistance was provided to 57 people, 27 of whom were hospitalized. Ten automobiles and 12 motorcycles/mopeds were burned, and 3 000 Meskhetian Turks were relocated out of the district [27].

The events described above occurred against a backdrop of unaddressed economic, social, ecological, and youth unemployment problems in Toshloq district. An alarming 20–25 percent of the productive population was not engaged in gainful labor, and 12.2 percent were officially unemployed. On the “Oq oltin” collective farm alone, over 2 000 people were unemployed, among them 800 youth [28]. Most Toshloq youth used to work in the industrial enterprises of Fergana and Margilan cities; since 1988, they were deprived of this opportunity [29]. At the initiative of A. G. Likholat, the former chairman of the Fergana City Council's executive committee, a decree was adopted prohibiting the recruitment of rural laborers into industrial enterprises, institutions, and organizations of Fergana city. Should collective farmland residents be hired by urban enterprises, the manager faced fines of 3 000–4 000 rubles [30]. Later, Margilan residents adopted the same rule, effectively banning youth employment in Fergana's industrial enterprises. Perhaps this measure was beneficial for Russian cities, but Likholat's failure to consider local conditions when applying this in the Fergana Valley further exacerbated the region's socio-economic situation. It would not be fair to attribute all blame to the center; local representatives who supported the centrally implemented policy—particularly deputies of the people's councils—also bore substantial responsibility for such a decision. A chauvinistic mentality had taken root among central-appointed leaders, who believed rural youth were uneducated, unable to adapt to urban industrial work, and did not require vocational training; instead, they claimed qualified personnel should be brought from Russia. Simultaneously, large enterprise managers were granted the right to freely bring in and house laborers from outside. At a time when local youth in Fergana Region faced serious unemployment issues, the policy of Russification was rigorously pursued. In the republic, two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, yet 70–80 percent of industrial enterprises were located in cities.

Housing provision, healthcare, trade, communal services, transportation, and cultural services in rural areas lagged far behind those in cities. Centralized heating reached only 5 percent of rural dwellings; sewerage, 2.2 percent; natural gas, 12 percent; and potable water supply, 48 percent [31].

In 1989, Toshloq district had a population of 102.6 thousand. By January 1990, the district had four hospitals with a total of 900 beds. Archival records indicate that healthcare and medical services were in an extremely dire state. In Birlik village council, where 9 679 people resided, there was only one doctor and 13 nurses [32]. Moreover, Soyboyi, Tojik village, Boy village, and Qipchoq village had no medical stations at all.

In Naimancha village of Toshloq district, 850 households; Birlik village, 420 households; Varzak, 1

085 households; and Axshak, 691 households—totaling thousands of people—lacked access to potable water. In the Kirov, Naiman, and Bostan village councils, there was no natural gas. In Syadda village, 7 027 people; Birlik, 1 479 people; and Naiman, 1 351 people had no gas pipelines to their homes [33]. The failure to timely address these economic, social, and ecological problems was the primary cause of the escalation of events.

On 6 June 1989, youth from Rishton went to Margilan for a demonstration on three buses; however, upon reaching the city outskirts, checkpoint officers informed them that the demonstration had ended and that an Uzbek–Meskhetian Turk clash was occurring in Kokand, redirecting them there. At that time, the situation in Kokand was calm, with no clashes taking place. Nevertheless, upon learning from police officers that the 76 youth traveling by bus were headed to Kokand, they were detained en route; 23 managed to escape and warned youth in neighboring districts. However, the residents of Kokand remained entirely unaware of these events [34].

Despite the unrest at the city threshold, all roads leading into Kokand remained open on 7 June. On that day, individuals armed with various items and tools from surrounding districts entered the city in automobiles, demanding the release of the 76 detained youth and compelling the local population to assist them. At that moment, no law enforcement officers were present. During a similar incident, a police officer suddenly shot and killed a 16-year-old boy. Enraged, the crowd stoned police officers. This confrontation resulted in 20 deaths and 77 injuries [35]. The chief surgeon of the city hospital, Dr. Shavkat Sodiqov—who witnessed these events—recounted: “When the shooting began, I was at the hospital. Suddenly, gunfire rang out; shortly thereafter, the wounded and dead were brought in. We immediately proceeded to operate. However, the wounded kept arriving in waves, most of them severely injured. Within 20 minutes, forty young men soaking in blood were brought in. We managed to bring eleven physicians and run to Lenin Square. We appealed to soldiers and police officers to cease fire. They paused for a moment, then stopped shooting. We appealed to the people to disperse” [36].

It is worth noting that the tragedy of 7 June incited widespread indignation. In protest, people overturned and burned roadside kiosks and newspaper stands, among other things. On 8 June, a peaceful assembly of over 5 000 people was held in front of the city party committee building to express their grievances to city leaders and to demand accountability for those who had shot at civilians. During this assembly, they submitted a written six-point petition to the former first secretary of the city party committee, Kh. N. Musabekov. As he began to respond to the demands, Lieutenant Maximovich of military unit “N” ordered his soldiers to shoot into the sky and at the crowd. Soldiers fired upon the sky and at people. City officials retreated into the building. Official data indicate that 21 people were killed and over 112 injured [37]. In the Ural, Frunze, Kirov, Leningrad, Baghdad, and Rishton districts, there were also fatalities and injuries. For instance, in the Rishton district alone, 23 people were officially recorded as wounded [38]. In total, between 3 and 12 June, as a result of interethnic clashes and shootings by military personnel in Fergana Region, 102 people lost their lives, 1 009 were injured, and 650 households were set ablaze and destroyed [39]. Analysis of data related to the Fergana tragedies indicates that the Meskhetian Turk crisis was used as a pretext by the repressive regime to justify the forced return of Meskhetian Turks—who had been expelled from their motherland during wartime—to their supposed “homeland.” The local population, in turn, became naturally embroiled in this conflict. This was because local authorities paid no attention to socio-economic problems; youth unemployment increased; living standards fell; housing needs were unmet; building plots remained undistributed; single-minded cotton cultivation persisted; ecological problems remained unresolved; corruption and deceit abounded; and lawlessness prevailed [40].

The tragedies in Kokand could have been prevented had administrative bodies taken measures in a timely manner—by verifying the identities of those detained, by neither losing their composure in the face of such events, and by preventing such tragedies. According to many participants, including A. Olimov, M. Yunusov, and I. Mamatov (from Zahidon village of Rishton district), the crowds primarily

raised economic, social, and ecological issues [41]. They demanded the abolition of cotton monoculture, an increase in procurement prices for cotton, and reduction of cotton planting. They also demanded that those who shot at civilians on 7 June be held accountable. However, the shooting of the 16-year-old adolescent and the subsequent shootings of unarmed civilians greatly exacerbated the situation. Extremist forces seized upon this turmoil to channel events toward harsh repression of the Turks. Moreover, the shooting of peaceful civilians increased young people's resentment toward the military and police. A widespread distrust of government bodies emerged among the younger generation. This, in turn, further complicated the situation. Additionally, the Kokand events differed fundamentally from those in Kuvasoy and Toshloq, as they had distinct socio-economic significance. Nevertheless, due to errors by law enforcement and administrative leadership, these events escalated even further.

We believe that there are many opinions regarding the Kokand tragedies. These events were primarily linked to social, economic, and ecological hardships. The population's written demands presented to government officials were as follows: closure of the Yangiqrugon chemical plant; employment of the unemployed; wage increases; increases in cotton procurement prices; reduction of cotton planting or the complete abolition of cotton monoculture; and holding those who shot at peaceful civilians on 7 June legally accountable [42].

The commission investigating the Kokand tragedies (or, more precisely, determining whether the use of firearms in Kokand was lawful) did not satisfy the majority. In the commission's document, it was stated that police and soldiers did not fire at the crowd but rather discharged warning shots into the sky. Primary sources recorded that 1 473 rounds of 5.45 mm caliber ammunition were fired during the Kokand shooting [43]. For reference, the 5.45 mm caliber round was invented in the 1970s as an exceptionally advanced technical solution, and if it struck something, it could alter its trajectory at that very moment.

In conclusion, the Fergana tragedies occurred as a direct consequence of the crude violations of national policies perpetrated by the CPSU and Soviet government over many years, and of the chauvinistic and violent state policy. During Perestroika, efforts to remedy the tragic outcomes of national policies gained momentum; however, party and government leaders lost control of the situation and proved unable to prevent these tragedies. As a result, various violent and extremist elements, criminal gangs, provocateurs, and enemies of other peoples—especially those opposed to the peaceful coexistence of the peoples of Uzbekistan—capitalized on the situation.

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