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COTTON PRODUCTION IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE PHOTO COLLECTIONS OF THE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY (1870 — THE 1930S)

Abstract. The paper endeavours to contextualize the photo collections of 1870 — the 1930s from the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE), featuring cotton growing and production in Central Asia, that have until now played a preeminent role in the life of the region. Throughout centuries, this agricultural crop has had a particular significance in the development of the local trade and crafts. The crop gained an additional economic significance after Central Asia's incorporation into Russia. The MAE photo collections on cotton production in Central Asia include almost every stage of growing, cotton ginning and even cotton textile production. The earliest photographs mainly depict the pre-treatment steps of cotton processing, including boiling out, batting, scutching, and spinning ("The Turkestan Album", F. Hordet). The primitive process of cotton ginning dominated in the region for years. The primary stages of cotton growing are depicted in the photographic materials of later years, specifically the 1920s and 1930s (including photographs of loosening the soil, sorting out and planting the seeds, weeding the young crops, picking the raw cotton, transporting, storing and ginning it).

Keywords: museum, collections, MAE RAS, Central Asia, expeditions, photographs, shots, region, culture, photographic materials

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) houses a number of relatively unknown photo collections depicting traditional cotton production in Central Asia. The photographs cover a wide range of themes and show the patient work of the local population, the growing and processing of cotton (preparing the field, planting the seeds, weeding the young plants, picking the raw cotton, transporting, storing and ginning it, delivering and receiving the harvest, ginning the raw cotton, spinning and weaving). This crop is crucial for the region. Cotton has always been the region's main asset and has played a key role in the development of local trade and crafts for centuries. This overview of previously unpublished photographs from the MAE collections from 1870 to the 1930s depicting cotton production in Central Asia includes images of various stages of cotton cultivation and processing.

Cotton gained particular economic importance following the incorporation of Central Asia into Russia. Cotton production really began to flourish, especially after the introduction of new disease-resistant varieties with high quality cotton fibre. There was a surge in capital flows and cotton processing plants began to be built [1].

The earliest photographs mainly show the preliminary phases of cotton processing, including boiling out, batting, scutching and spinning into yarn ("The Turkestan Album", F. Hordet). The photo, inscribed "Cotton Ginning and Spinning" (*fig. 1*), and made by F. Hordet in the 1870s, features three men in traditional dress demonstrating how to operate machinery for processing cotton. In Central Asia, many activities were performed while sitting on the floor or ground, as shown in the image. The photographer arranged the men in the staged photograph according to the steps of cotton processing, from left to right: a scene with cotton ginning, then one with spinning.

The lower part of the mat on which the photo is pasted has an inscription: "Sarts". The inscription under the figure on the left reads: "Cotton Ginning", and the inscription under the other two figures reads: "Spinning of Cotton Yarn". Underneath the left part of the image are words scratched out on the photosensitive surface of the glass plate negative: "Ginning Machine for Separating Cotton Fibres from Their Seeds". The collector would have been familiar with the technical innovations and terminology of the time, including the "Cotton gin" — a machine invented in the United States to remove impu-

rities from raw cotton. That's why he must have named the car in the photograph "Gin", ironically enough. The cotton machine in the photograph is a prototype of the modern gin, an ancient hand-operated machine, the *chigrik*, which was widely used at the time. This primitive hand-operated machine consisted of two horizontal wooden cylinders between two stands, set in motion by a lever. The cotton bolls were cracked open by hand, the raw cotton fibres removed and the seeds separated from the fibres using this primitive machine. With this type of manual ginning, the cotton fibres got caught between the cylinders and the seeds simply fell off. The ginner would use one hand to set the cylinder in motion and the other hand to place raw cotton in the narrow slit between the cylinders, which tore the seeds from the cotton fibre. Cotton is scattered around the machine in the photograph. Ginning with this type of machine took a long time, which affected productivity. It took a ginner one day to remove the raw cotton from the bolls and another day to gin it. The fibres remained impure, so the ginner had to scour them to remove boll waste.

Inscribing additional information about the photograph on the glass plate was a hallmark of F. Hordet, photographer, collector and scholar. In the lower right corner of the negative there is what can be called his signature or the author's brand name — "Ф. ОрдеN" (F. OrdeN), with a capital N at the end. F. Hordet often tried to make his photographs as clear as possible for the viewer, adding verbal expression to the visual information. In the inscription on the mat, below the two figures of men in the centre and right of the photograph: "Spinning of Cotton Yarn", the collector emphasised what he considered most important: "The Spinning Wheel".

The photograph features similar spinning wheels arranged so that their design can be seen from both sides. Spinners spin the cotton fibre using ancient devices to make yarn from tow (ginned cotton). The double wheel of the mechanism was set in motion by a handle. The tow was tied to the top of the spinning wheel and the fibres were manually stretched and twisted. The traditional *charkh* spinning wheel was affordable, usable, simple in design and easy to use. In the MAE collections there are several photographs from different districts of the region showing cotton being spun into yarn with the *charkh* spinner. One of them, "An Old Tekke Woman Spinning Cotton with a *Charkh* Spinning Wheel", features the design of the wheel. Studying these photographs of cotton production, one can see that there was a clear gender division of labour. The old photographs show only women spinning cotton into yarn.

Another artisan gin is depicted in an early photograph from the Turkestan Album: "Cotton Production: Separating Cotton Fibre from Seeds" (fig. 2).

The ginning machine appears in photographs taken at the same time as F. Hordet's activities in Central Asia: on the floor of a workshop in Samarkand, in front of a hand-operated ginning machine, a ginner sits with his legs crossed. To his left and right are two piles of cotton. He takes raw cotton from one pile and places it between the two cylinders of the ginning machine; the other pile contains ginned cotton.

This primitive technology of cotton ginning was used in the region for many years. Thus, the field material from the second half of the 1920s, compiled by Aleksander Melkov (1887 — ca. 1930) during his expedition to Karakalpakstan, contains information about an artisanal method of cotton ginning in the village of Kylchinak, near Turtkul (fig. 3) [2]. A. L. Melkov took a photograph of a woman sitting in front of a wooden machine with a child on her lap. The photograph is of very poor quality, making it impossible to identify the design of this gin. Cotton processing was perceived as something that could be done between domestic chores, such as babysitting, as seen in the photograph; cotton could be ginned and spun into yarn at odd times.

In the same village (fig. 4), Melkov managed to photograph an instrument for separating "trash" from raw cotton fibres, called a *shygyrshék*. The instrument was essentially a comb made of a piece of wood with two to four rows of needle-like spikes and a handle. The *shygyrshék* was used to manually comb out impurities.

Photographic material from a later period records the primary stages of cotton cultivation (loosening the soil, sorting and planting the seeds, weeding the young plants, picking the raw cotton, transport, storage and ginning). Participants in the first Soviet expeditions (1920s — 1930s) took pictures of Uzbek and Tajik farmers using primitive tools that had been in use for centuries.

A 1932 glass plate negative (fig. 5) by Semyon Bel'kin (1905 — after 1932) [3] depicts ploughing with traditional ox-drawn ploughs (*omach*) in Karakalpakstan. The photograph shows oxen slowly ploughing a field, followed by a ploughman with his hands on the wooden *omach* plough. The photograph also shows a man — probably a member of the expedition — standing next to the peasant in the field. The photograph represents the design of the most ancient agricultural tool — a wooden plough with an iron tip — the *omach*. The wooden trunk, also shown in the photograph, was used as an oxbow, an arched collar used to yoke animals. *Omaches* were made by local craftsmen throughout Central Asia. Usually two animals were yoked to the plough. In other areas, horses or camels could be used as draught animals. The advantage of oxen (prepared bulls) over horses was their strength and endurance. As ploughing was physically demanding, it was done by men.

The Museum's photographic material on cotton production in Central Asia complements the archival material. S. A. Bel'kin's 1932 field records on the development of cotton production in the region state that cotton had been grown on *bai* farms in Karakalpakstan since the beginning of the 20th century, but then peasants began to grow the crop. Local *bai* bought cotton and transported it to Chimbay, where they sold it to Russian merchants. According to Bel'kin, the *bai* and the merchants had no contractual arrangements regarding the cultivation of cotton [4].

Traditional agricultural tools had been used in the region for a long time, because most of the old ploughs and farming implements were quite efficient and practical, whereas European tools were less preferred simply

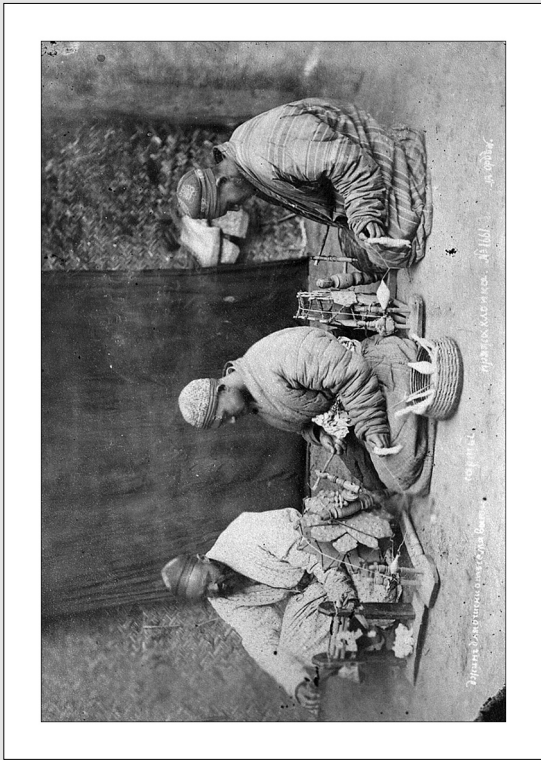


Fig. 1

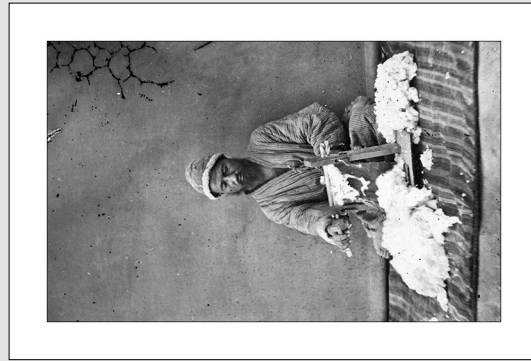


Fig. 3

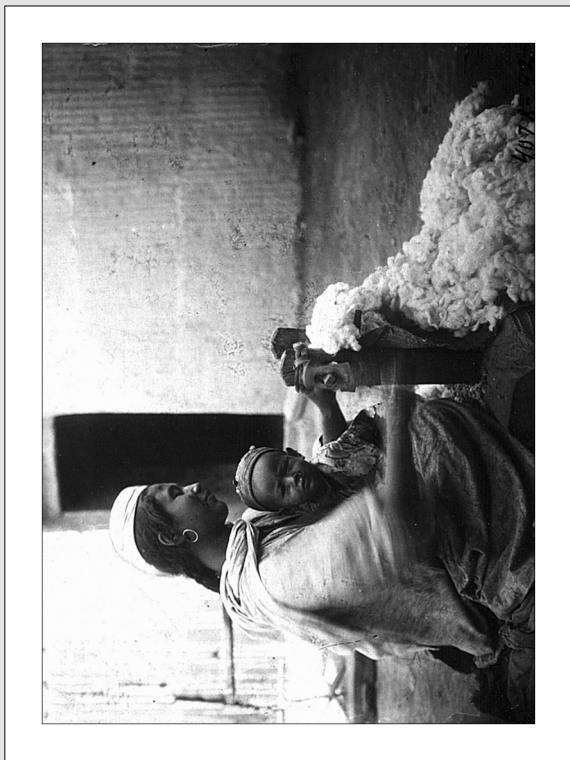


Fig. 2

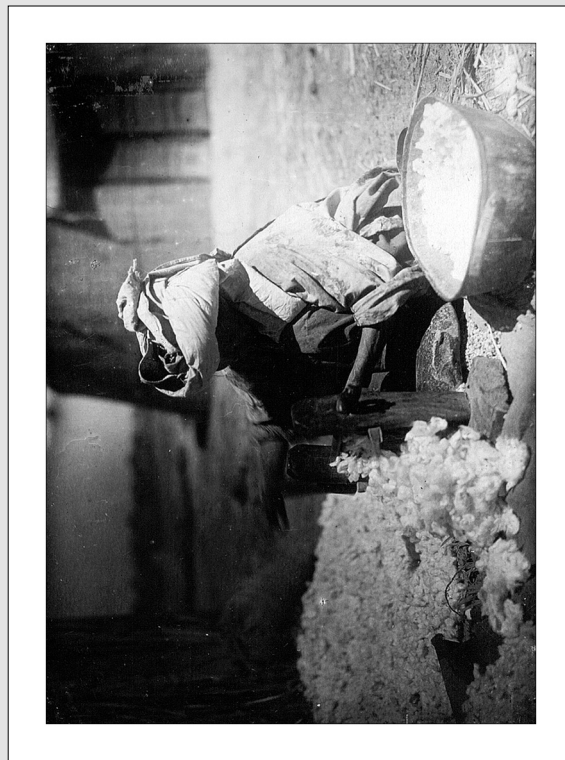


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

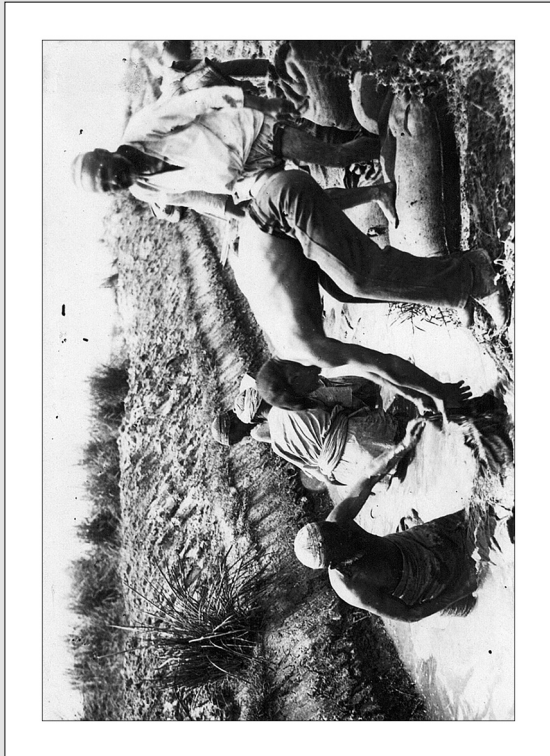


Fig. 7

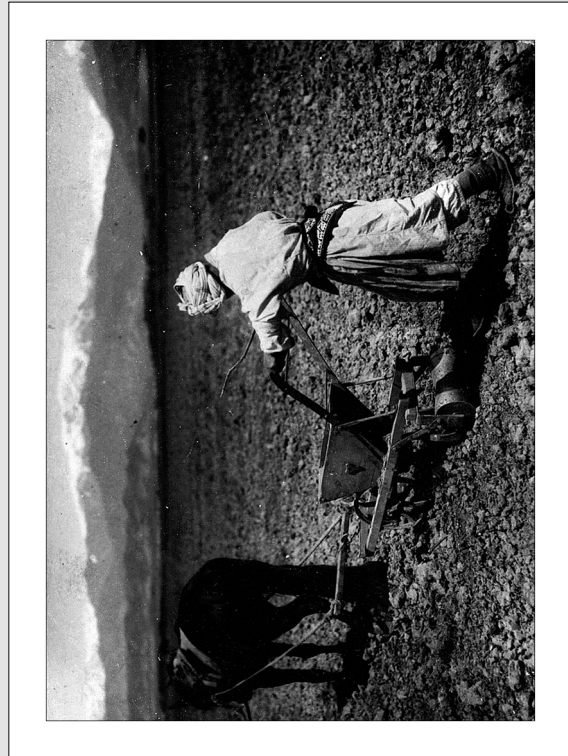


Fig. 8

because the peasants did not know how to use them. In 1932, Bel'kin wrote in his field journal that the peasants lacked modern agricultural equipment and that European equipment was very slow to be adopted, resulting in very low productivity:

There are three ploughs in the kolkhoz (collective farm) of Algas, but they are not used for their intended purpose. The cotton plants have not been ploughed with a shovel plough... because, most likely, the peasants do not know how to use them and the local crop specialists do not teach the collective farmers new agricultural methods... Shovel ploughs, scythes, yokes — all these tools are piled up. The ploughs are rusty, and so are the scythes. None of the collective farmers can scythe, so they use *uraks*. They sow cotton with seeders and also by hand. The role of agricultural machinery is minimal [5].

In 1932, during the sowing season, the Algas kolkhoz did all its ploughing with simple ploughs. After ploughing, the soil was turned up with *omach* [emphasised by S. A. Bel'kin — *V. P.*]. Sowing was partly done with a seed drill (35%), the rest was done manually. Only 8 people know how to use the plough [6].

The soil was ploughed with an *omach* in autumn and harrowed and prepared for sowing cotton in early spring. In Central Asia, cotton sowing began in April. In this 1934 photograph by Sergei Tolstov (1907—1976), Turkmen kolkhoz women in traditional costume look at cotton seeds and prepare them for planting (*fig. 6*). Only high quality seeds were used for sowing — these were collected in the autumn, before the ground frosts. The photograph was donated to the MAE by the State Central Museum of Ethnography in 1954 [7]. Some of the photographs in the collection belonged to Sergei Tolstov, collector, future academician, eminent historian, Orientalist, ethnographer and archaeologist, who headed the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow for 20 years during the Soviet period. From 1929 to 1936 he worked at the Museum of the Peoples of the USSR, which was later transformed into the State Central Museum of Ethnography. After its closure in the 1950s, its collections were distributed among several museums, including the MAE. Tolstov studied at Moscow State University until 1930 and did his internship in Khorezm, among the Turkmen. He must have taken several photographs during this period, which became part of the photographic collection of the State Central Museum of Ethnography, some of which ended up in the MAE.

Cotton seeds were selected for planting, then sprouted and tested for germination. The seeds were either soaked in water for 10—24 hours or wetted three times every 10 hours. The 1935 photograph (*fig. 7*) shows Tajik peasants soaking cotton seeds in an irrigation ditch. The photograph was taken in the Vakhsh river basin. The collection was donated to the MAE by the State Central Museum of Ethnography in 1954.

There were many rules to be followed in order to reap a good harvest. Cotton is a sun and heat-loving plant, so the soil must be at least 10–12 °C for the seeds to sprout. If the soil freezes to 1–2 °C, the plant dies.

Peasants planted the germinated seeds in different ways. The photograph “Peasant Sowing Cotton” (*fig. 8*) shows an ancient method of sowing recorded in 1932 by the participants of the Tajik–Pamir Complex Expedition of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The expedition aimed to study and modernise various remote areas of the Gharm Oblast: Qarategin, Vakhio and Darvaz [8].

The photograph shows a sower walking across the field, leaning over the handles of a metal sowing machine. A horse is harnessed to the machine, the design of which is clearly visible in the photograph. A horse-drawn cotton planter consisted of a three-wheeled machine (one large front wheel and two smaller rear wheels), which contained a square container with a conical bottom. The bottom of this device would have had a narrow chute through which the seed would have fallen into the furrow.

If all the necessary agricultural conditions have been met, cotton begins to sprout in 5—7 days. After that, ploughing, irrigation, watering, weeding and topping required manual handling and many peasants — and these were in shortage. The state of cotton production in Central Asia in the 1930s was complicated by the fact that cotton was becoming the leading economic crop in the republics. In their field diaries, scholars recorded that cotton areas were expanding at the expense of wheat and other cereals. In 1930, for example, raw cotton accounted for 75% of the gross yield [9].

A. L. Melkov took the photograph “Weeding Cotton” (*fig. 9*) in Karakalpakstan in 1930. The photograph is of a vast field full of planting beds with barely visible cotton sprouts. In the scorching sun, between the planting beds, a group of teenagers are pulling up weeds. Their faces, arms and legs are bare. The cotton fields are weeded several times between May and July. Judging from the photograph, weeding was much harder than picking cotton by hand.

In another photograph by Melkov, two teenagers, a girl and a boy, are also engaged in weeding cotton. The girl is sitting in the field without a headscarf (*fig. 10*). As the weeds grew quickly, the cotton had to be repeatedly weeded.

During the Soviet period, from mid-September to mid-December, children from the 5th grade upwards were regularly excused from school and sent to pick cotton. Students and workers (some companies and offices were suspended during the harvest season) were also involved in picking cotton, while children were also involved in weeding from May to July. Cotton production affected the school curriculum in Central Asia, which was significantly reduced.

The 1932 photograph from the collection of Aleksander Kondaurov (1906—1942), a scholar of Iranian studies working at the MAE [10], shows that in Tajikistan even nursing women with babies were employed to weed cotton (*fig. 11*). To be fair, cotton producers such as China and India also used child labour during the harvest season. Bel'kin's photograph, taken in Karakalpakstan in 1932 (*fig. 12*), clearly illustrates the use of women and children for hard labour in the fields. Describing the process of earthing up cotton in the field, Bel'kin

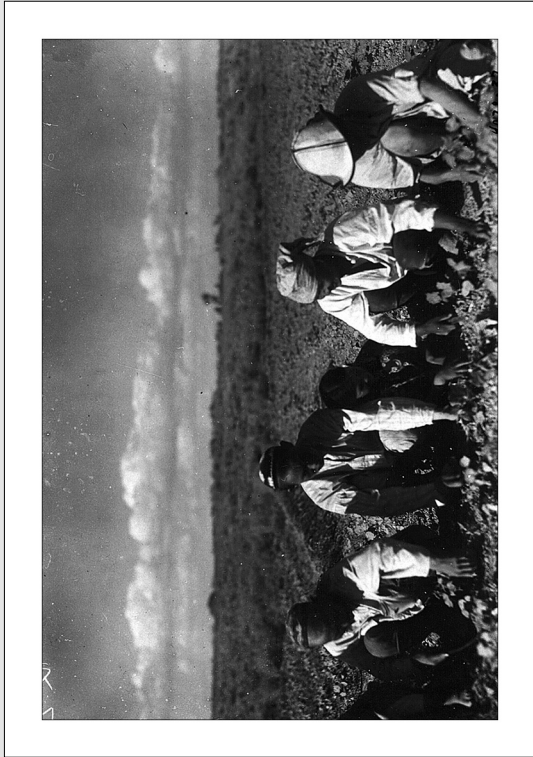


Fig. 9



Fig. 11

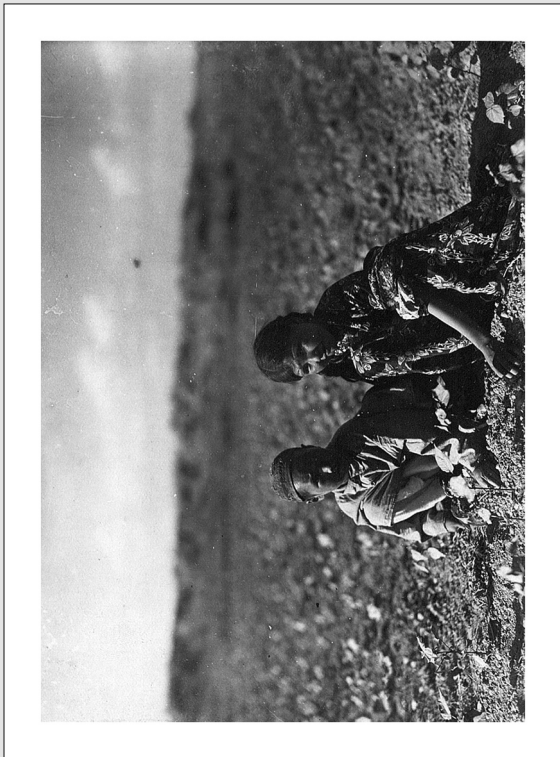


Fig. 10



Fig. 12

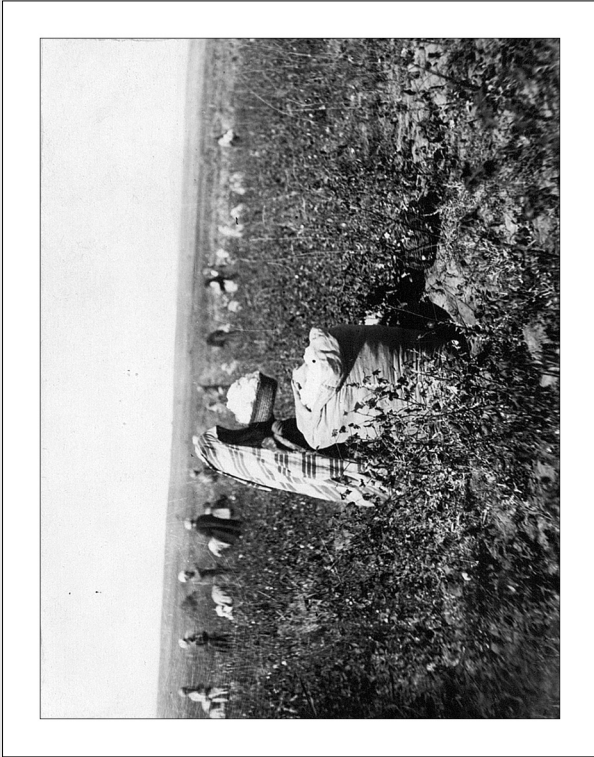


Fig. 13

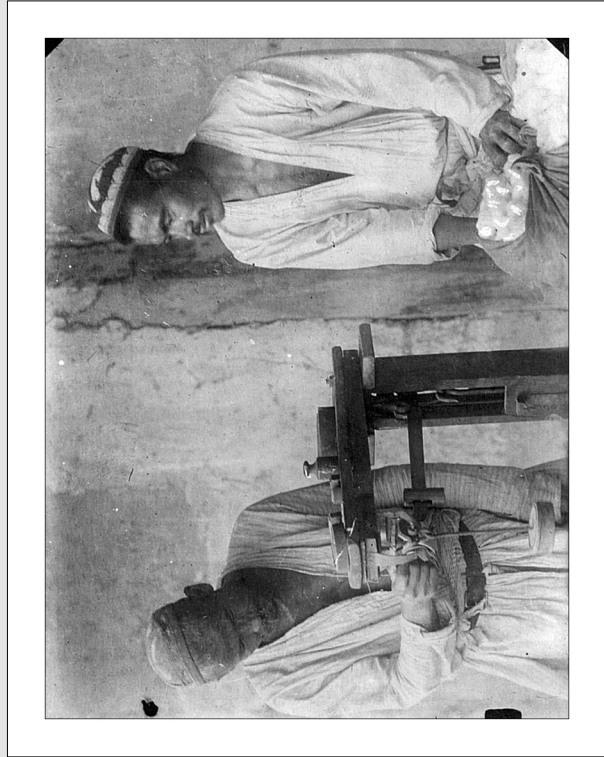


Fig. 15

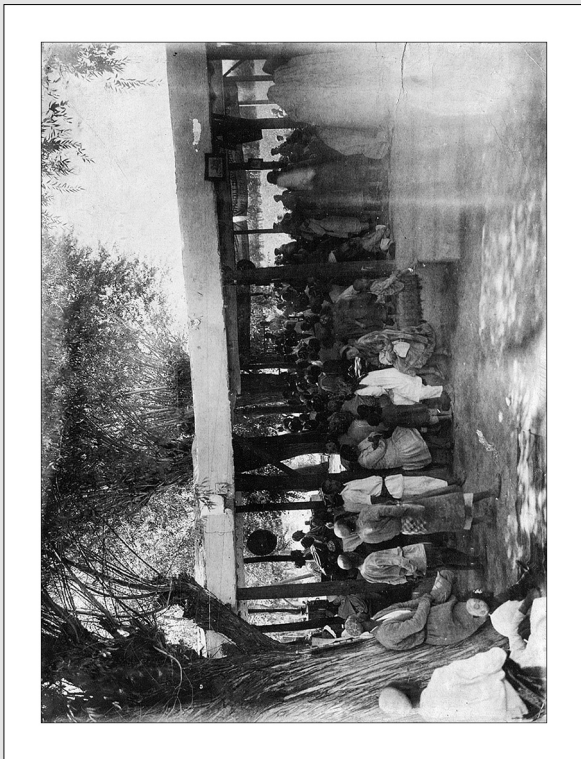


Fig. 14

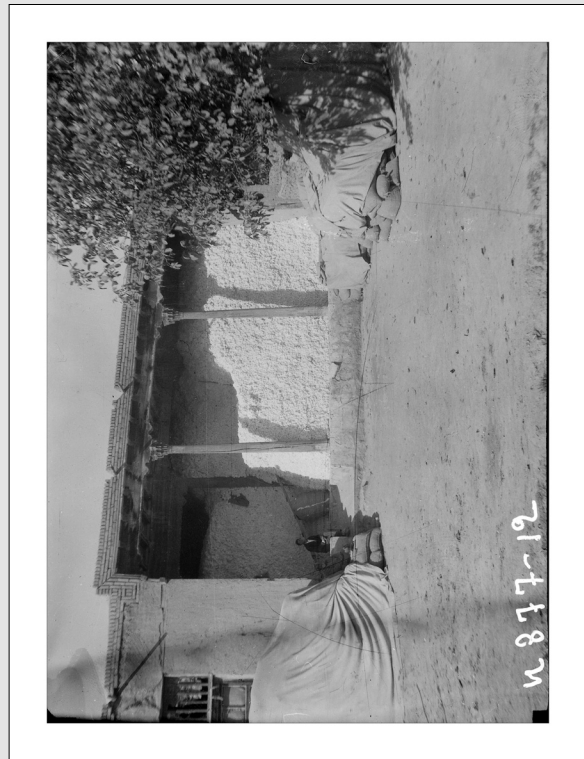


Fig. 16

wrote in his expedition journal: “Women take their babies and small children to the field and they sit on their mothers' laps while the cotton is being planted” [11]. In the field, women breastfed their babies while they worked, under the supervision of their male superiors on horseback. The harvest was gathered by women and children, while men worked as team foremen, inspectors, crop specialists and warehouse inspectors.

Cotton was hand-picked in the autumn; it was severely underpaid, voluntary and compulsory labour. The photograph “Cotton Picking”, taken in the Vakhsh river basin in Tajikistan (*fig. 13*), shows a woman working in the field among tall cotton plants, her head wrapped in a striped coat to protect her from the scorching sun.

Members of the cotton campaign watched the performance reports on cotton picking with interest. They were given titles and rewards for setting records. Some of the images in the collections show kolkhoz meetings, which were frequent in Tajikistan at the time. The photograph “A General Meeting of Members of the Kolkhoz Named After J. Stalin. Discussing Stalin's High Cotton Yield Campaign” (*fig. 14*) shows a gathering of men under a tent erected in the shade of trees. Among them are a number of women, some with babies.

“Stalin's high cotton yield campaign” originated at the First All-Union Congress of Collective Farm Shock Workers, held in Moscow in 1933. The congress adopted an appeal to all members of collective farms in the USSR to spread an all-Union socialist competition. After the congress, movements sprang up all over the country: “Stalin's high yield campaign”, “Kaganovich's [12] yield campaign”, etc. As a result of the competition, the shock workers were rewarded with valuable gifts.

In the 1930s, Uzbek party officials decided to launch their own “Stalin's High Yield Campaign”. They issued a special badge of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, which showed the profile of the leader with a cotton branch underneath. Below this was the name of the badge [13].

Apparently, like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan also launched its own “Stalin's high yield campaign”. This is evidenced by the aforementioned collection of 25 photographs by Radzhabov, donated to the museum in 1934, which is a photographic record of the everyday life of cotton growers, mainly from the Khujand district. In 1929–1933, during the years of collectivisation, many kolkhozes were established in the larger cotton-growing districts of Tajikistan, such as Khujand district. A close analysis of the sources leads to the conclusion that the collection belonged to Zarif Radzhabov (1906–1990), a native of Khujand who graduated from the Moscow Institute of History and Philosophy. Radzhabov later became an eminent Soviet Tajik historian and an academician of the Academy of Sciences of the Tajik SSR. He was the first President of the Tajik State University and Director of the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Tajik SSR.

One of the photographs in Z. Sh. Radzhabov's collection shows a panoramic view of his home city, Khujand, in 1934. The old city had a long history of weav-

ing, and in 1927–1928 the first silk weaving factory was opened there; some of the photographs represent the factory, its workshops with looms, cotton bobbins, twist-ers and other equipment used by the women. The factory workers lived in the dormitory — a one-storey mud-walled barracks that can be seen in one of the photographs. Water was piped into the factory from a tall circular water tower (seen in one of the photographs). One photograph shows seamstresses sitting in front of sewing machines and a man, allegedly their superior, walking through the corridors.

The photographs in Z. Sh. Radzhabov's collection document various stages of cotton production. One photograph shows long rows of cotton plants with collective farm workers leaning over them in light *chapan*s (Uzbek quilted dressing gowns) and skullcaps. There are also several portraits of shock workers, rewarded for high cotton yields — kolkhoz chairmen and foremen, some of them women.

The 1938 photograph Acceptance of cotton: weighing (*fig. 15*) was taken in the kolkhoz named after J. Stalin, Margelansky district, Uzbekistan, and was donated to the MAE by Anna Troitskaya (1899–1980), an ethnographer working at the museum at the time and returning from her trip to Central Asia. The photograph shows a man weighing raw cotton on a cargo scale and another man dragging a sack of raw cotton to it. Raw cotton was taken from the fields to the ginneries for ginning and pressing.

Large warehouses were needed to store the raw cotton before ginning and processing. Sometimes mosques, which were closed as part of the Soviet anti-religious policy, were used for this purpose. The photograph of a mosque used to store cotton was taken by Aleksander Kondaurov (1906–1942) in Kyrgyzstan. The collector noted that the entrance to the mosque was piled high with full sacks and covered with strips of cloth. The piles of cotton sacks on the *ayvān* reached the ceiling. The cotton was packed and stored in a special way so that it would stay dry inside the sack. On the terrace, a man sits in the shade (*fig. 16*).

In addition to the “High cotton yield campaigns”, there were also “Red caravans” of cotton. Vera Yakimova (1880–1942), who worked at the MAE, took a photograph of exactly this content (*fig. 17*). In the foreground is a camel driver on a mule. Behind him is a camel with colourful tassels, loaded with huge sacks of cotton. The “Red Caravans” were a form of political and mass cultural education of the local population in the early years of Soviet rule. The departure of the “Red Caravan” marked the beginning of mass cotton picking.

The photograph “Transport of Cotton from the Kolkhoz Named after Akhun Babaev” (*fig. 18*), taken in Karakalpakstan, shows the festive atmosphere surrounding the delivery of the raw cotton crop as it was harvested in the field — impurities, straw and all — to the ginneries. The caravan is led by a truck loaded with sacks of cotton, followed by a chain of loaded arba carts drawn by horses. There is a driver in each arba cart. The photograph, originally from the State Central Museum of Ethnography and taken by S. P. Tolstov in 1934, is

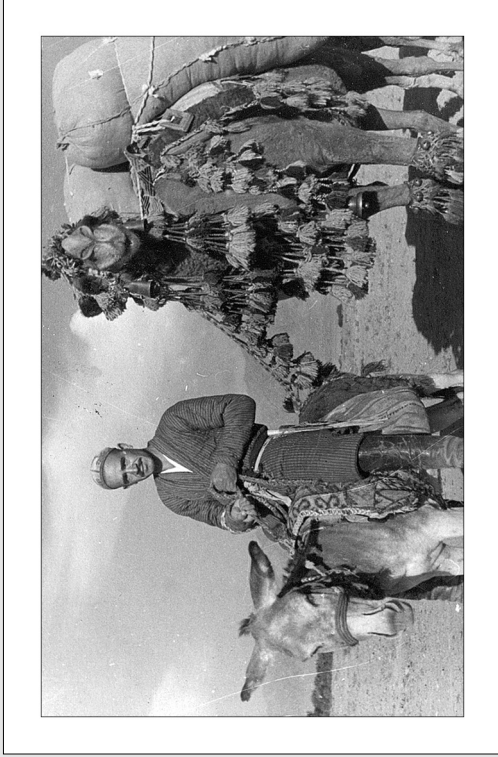


Fig. 17

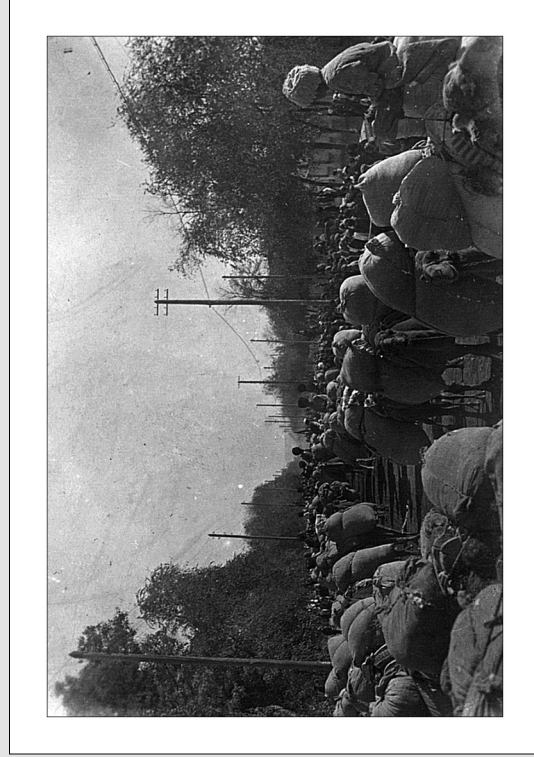


Fig. 19

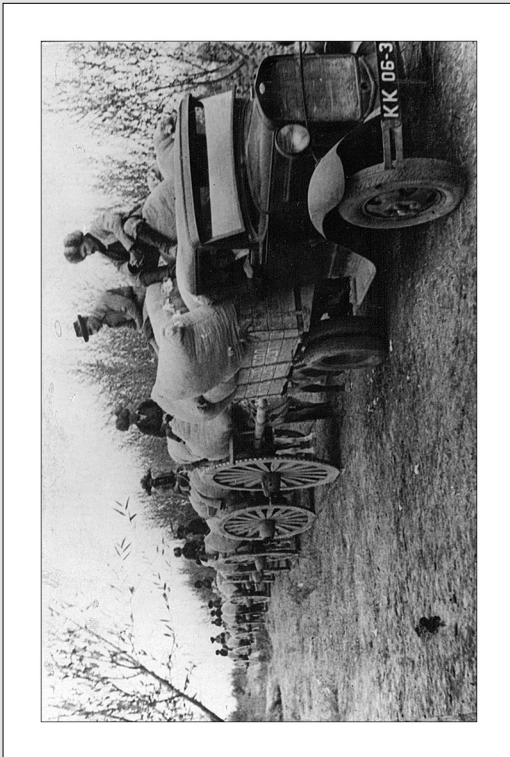


Fig. 18

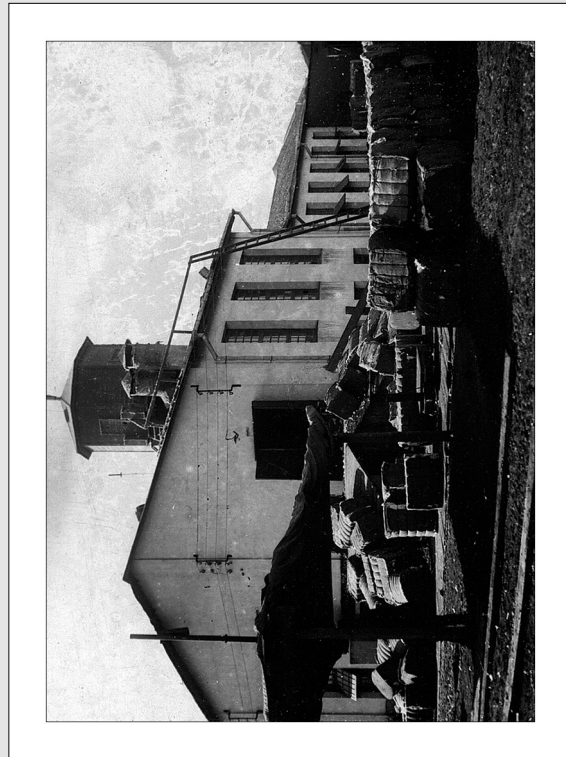


Fig. 20

called Kolkhoz caravan with cotton (fig. 19). Many camels loaded with sacks can be seen in the photograph. They are lined up side by side, with camel drivers scattered around the photograph.

In 1932, members of the Tajik Complex Expedition took a photograph, “Cotton Warehouse at a Cotton Factory” (fig. 20), which shows a single-storey building on the site of a ginnery, with piles of pressed cotton bales in front of it.

As noted above, the photographs in the MAE collections (1870 — 1930s) on the history of cotton production in Central Asia illustrate almost all stages of cotton cul-

tivation and primary processing. The historical photographs also record episodes from the lives of cotton producers who planted, grew, picked and processed raw cotton in a challenging environment. The photographs show traditional methods of growing cotton, the use of traditional agricultural tools and hand-operated, artisanal gins, and tell a story of slow technological progress. The study of the museum's photographic collections on the history of cotton production in Central Asia from 1870 to the 1930s not only allows them to be used in research, but also visualises the real historical and economic situation in the region at the time.

Notes

1. See: Massal'sky, 1892; Poniatovsky, 1913; Gubarevich-Radobyl'sky, 1914.
2. For more details see: Prischepova, 2000: 130—134; idem, 2013: 173—179.
3. For more details see: idem, 2018.
4. *The MAE RAS Archive*, fund Col-I, inv. 2, No. 295, vol. II, fol. 29—29op.
5. *The MAE RAS Archive*, fund Col-I, inv. 2, No. 296, vol. III, fol. 40.
6. *The MAE RAS Archive*, fund K-I, inv. 2, No. 296, vol. III, fol. 45.

7. For more details see: Prischepova 2009: 323—375.
8. For more details see: idem, 2000: 202—209.
9. *The MAE RAS Archive*, fund K-I, inv. 2, No. 299, vol. VI, fol. 5.
10. For more details see: Prischepova, 2000: 202—209.
11. *The MAE RAS Archive*, fund K-I, inv. 2, No. 296, vol. III, fol. 44.
12. Lazar Kaganovich (1893—1991) was one of Joseph Stalin's associates, eminent Soviet politician, administrative and party official.
13. Gleizer, 2012.

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Illustrations

- Fig. 1.** F. Hordet, *Cotton Ginning and Spinning*. Sarts, Turkestan, late 19th century. 12.0×17.0 cm. MAE RAS, call No. 255—141. Courtesy of the Museum.
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