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The Everyday Life of The Rural Population of Karakalpakstan During the Second World War

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Abstract: This article is dedicated to the living and working conditions of the rural population of Karakalpakstan during the Second World War. It highlights the fundamental aspects of the everyday history of the Karakalpak people during this period, including lifestyle, diet, clothing, occupations, education, leisure, weddings, songs, rituals, habits, and health. Drawing on archival materials, the paper illustrates the dedicated labor of the Karakalpak people on the home front to provide for the soldiers of the Red Army. Based on oral testimonies from eyewitnesses of that harsh era, the study examines the challenging living conditions and domestic realities experienced behind the lines of the Second World War.

Keywords: Rural residents of Karakalpakstan, grain, rice, alfalfa, U. Tleubergenov, cotton fields, agricultural sphere.

Introduction: The people of Karakalpakstan, alongside other nations of the Soviet Union, made a significant contribution to the victory over fascism in the Second World War. While envoys from Karakalpakstan fought bravely and selflessly on the front lines, the elderly, women, and adolescents labored tirelessly on the home front.

On the eve of the war, a certain calm settled over rural life. In the agricultural sector, the consolidation of peasants into collective farms was completed: by 1938, there were 696 collective farms (kolkhozes), uniting 48,370 collective farmers with a total sown area of 100,600 hectares [1]. Archival documents asserted that "before the war, the population lived a quiet, peaceful life in a strictly agricultural and fishing region; there was no overcrowding of the population in general, nor specifically in any particular locations. There was almost no migration of the population" [2].

According to the results of the 1939 census, the rural population of Karakalpakstan totaled 411,900 people (217,171 men and 194,729 women), accounting for 87.7% of the total population [3]. The prevalence of rural residents in the republic's population structure was determined by the nature of land use and the daily practices of the people, taking into account their national and domestic characteristics. The implementation of regionalization (rayonirovanie), the primary task of which was to simplify the administrative division structure in accordance with the level of economic development, ethnic composition, and population size, further reinforced these characteristics. Consequently, the four-tier system of administrative division (region – district – province – village) was replaced by a three-tier system (okrug – district – village). This new system simplified the administrative management structure of the region.

During the 1930s, agricultural development—particularly in cotton growing—facilitated a gradual revival of the region's industry, especially cotton ginning. The restoration and reconstruction of Karakalpakstan's cotton ginning industry took place under extremely difficult conditions caused by the region's economic and cultural backwardness, its remoteness from major industrial centers, and a severe shortage of managerial, administrative, and labor personnel. The poor understanding of local natural resources and economic conditions, combined with a deficit of material and financial resources, created

additional obstacles to industrial recovery.

Large-scale capital investments in agriculture and its related industries began to be implemented only after the republic joined Uzbekistan. Thus, during the pre-war and war years, even greater attention was paid to the development of cotton growing in Karakalpakstan: new lands were developed, and the area under cotton cultivation increased (from 54,000 hectares in 1940 to 90,800.2 hectares in 1945) [4]. However, the situation in the daily lives of the rural population remained difficult. It worsened in the late 1930s when the government began a campaign against the private subsidiary plots of collective farmers, which had originally been the primary source of sustenance for peasant families. On May 27, 1939, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR adopted the resolution "On Measures to Protect the Public Lands of Collective Farms from Squandering" [5]. This document pointed to the "illegal expansion" of private plots through the "squandering and misappropriation" of communal collective farm lands. Subsequently, measures were implemented to measure the land plots held by collective farmers and seize any "surplus." Additionally, every collective farmer in cotton-growing regions was required to work a minimum of 100 labor days (trudodni).

Secondly, the republic's government undertook a series of measures to resettle rural residents into collective farm settlements (kolkhoznye posyolki). This was done in accordance with the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, "On the Resettlement of Collective Farm Households Living on Former Isolated Farmstead Lands into Collective Farm Settlements," dated May 27, 1939. The goal was to concentrate rural residents into these designated "collective farm settlements." However, within the specific conditions of our republic, this work was not completed. By the decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the Kara-Kalpak ASSR and the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, the task of resettling isolated farmsteads into collective settlements was assigned to the People's Commissariat of Agriculture (Narkomzem) of Karakalpakstan and various district organizations. On September 9, 1939, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture drafted a layout plan for the construction of 142 collective farm settlements by March 20, 1940. Nevertheless, only 82 settlements were constructed by the deadline. The progress regarding the integration of isolated farmsteads into existing socio-residential collective farm centers was particularly unsatisfactory. These activities were intended to be carried out through the efforts of the local districts.

Thirdly, in the years leading up to the war, significant attention began to be paid to the maintenance of labor discipline within collective farms. This focus was necessitated by a noticeable weakening of discipline resulting from the aforementioned government decisions; the peasants (dehkans) lacked material incentives to increase socialized production. This issue was specifically highlighted during the May Plenum of the Party Central Committee in 1940, which triggered a massive wave of agitational, propaganda, and practical efforts to implement the plenum's resolutions.

However, the effectiveness of these efforts was negligible. The interest of rural residents in the final results of their labor declined significantly, labor discipline was routinely ignored, and the overall quality of work deteriorated. Consequently, despite the exertion of Soviet and Party organs, the republic's cotton procurement plan was only 22% complete as of October 6, 1940. The primary press organ of the republic's leadership, Qyzyl Qaraqalpaqstan, reported that this was the direct result of low labor discipline among collective farmers and a failure to decisively combat violations of the Charter of the Agricultural Artel [7].

Starting in early 1941, the private subsidiary plots of rural residents were once again subjected to various taxes. For instance, on January 5, 1941, the Council of People's Commissars of the Kara-Kalpak ASSR adopted a resolution "On the Collection for Housing, Cultural, and Domestic Construction Needs from the Population Engaged in Agriculture for 1941 in the KKASSR" [8]. Overall, five such resolutions were passed between 1934 and 1940. According to this 1941 decree, every collective farmer without non-socialized sources of income was required to pay 8 rubles. For those collective farmers who possessed other sources of income (from private plots, livestock, poultry, etc.), the amount of the so-called "rural cultural levy" ranged from 29 to 36 rubles. The amount of the levy depended on the administrative-territorial location and the living standards of the population. The highest "cultural levy" (36 rubles) was imposed on rural residents in the collective farms of the Turtkul, Shabbaz, and Tamdy districts. Collective farmers in the Kegeyli, Khodjeyli, and Chimbay districts were taxed at 34 rubles; Kipchak and Muynak districts at 32 rubles; Nukus and Kuybyshev districts at 30 rubles; and Takhtakupir, Kungrad, and Karauzyak districts at 29 rubles. Residents of Turtkul, Nukus, Chimbay, the settlement of Muynak, and other urban formations who engaged in agriculture were also subject to this levy.

The "rural cultural levy" was also collected from

individual (non-collectivized) households, with the amount exceeding that of collective farmers by 12 to 20 times, depending on specific criteria. For example, individual households were divided into two categories: those without draft animals/other income and those with them. The former paid 100 rubles, while the latter paid 175 rubles, regardless of the district. These funds had to be collected between February and March—a time when household reserves were depleted, leaving only the supplies set aside for sowing. In parallel, the spring season saw the implementation of "self-taxation," audits of annual collective farm reports, and comprehensive tax assessments. In essence, while providing almost nothing to the rural population—who survived primarily through subsistence farming—the state simultaneously burdened them with numerous taxes. Furthermore, they were compelled through "voluntary-mandatory" means to purchase state loan bonds and participate in cash-and-prize lotteries, all while being required to deliver planned quotas of grain and shala (unhusked rice) to the state. All these processes were ensured under the strict control of Soviet and Party organs. For example, on November 26, 1940, the Council of People's Commissars of the KKASSR and the Regional Party Committee adopted a resolution on grain procurement, noting that collective farmers and individual peasants had delivered only 53% of the required grain and demanding that Party-Soviet leadership over procurement be strengthened [9]. With the outbreak of the war, this control intensified further. For instance, by July 1941, collective farmers in the Turtkul district had already purchased their entire allocated volume of the state loan in cash [10]. To pay these taxes and other levies, collective farmers often had to sell a portion of the harvest from their private subsidiary plots at the market, thereby reducing their own family’s consumption.

Even in the pre-war years, to enforce the decisions of the Party and the government, the Soviet-Party apparatus frequently took decisive measures, prosecuting all who failed to comply with the established order or violated the Charter of the Agricultural Artel. Repressive actions were initiated against rural residents; for example, Paluan Oteniyazov, a resident of the Stalin collective farm in the Khalkabad rural council of the Kuybyshev district, was brought to trial for picking only 10–12 kg of cotton per day, frequently failing to report for the harvest, and refusing to allow his daughter to work in the fields. Similarly, Bakhyt Kikishev, a resident of the 10th rural council of the Khodjeyli district, was tried for failing to perform agricultural labor throughout 1940 and forbidding his family from doing so. Brigadiers and collective farm managers were also prosecuted for failing to fulfill planned targets or falling behind the schedule for raw cotton delivery.

The cotton harvest campaign effectively became a "combat front." Authorities called for the mobilization of everyone for the harvest, including children and the elderly. Labor veteran U. Tleubergenov recalled that after he completed the 5th grade, the village elders (aksakals), after deliberation, began involving students in agricultural work as timekeepers: "Every day we were required to submit a report to the collective farm administration regarding the work completed that day. The distance to the administration office was 8–10 km. We covered this distance daily, walking nearly 20 km a day. Labor discipline was extremely strict; nevertheless, the results for cotton sowing and the yields for alfalfa, rice, and other crops remained low" [11]. Representatives of the Soviet-Party organs urged the involvement of everyone in this labor, even the elderly. For instance, while noting the lag in the cotton harvest plan for the collective farms of the "Gönebagzhap" village in the Turtkul district, it was pointed out that in the Frunze collective farm, "there are 379 people; according to the plan, 193 should enter the field, but if one adds the 'disabled,' the 'sick,' and the 'elderly,' this figure would increase even further" [12].

The Second World War entered the lives of the peaceful residents of Karakalpakstan's auls and kishlaks through the harsh, frightening truths of the Soviet Information Bureau reports and mobilization summons from the military recruitment offices. Furthermore, the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR "On the Working Time Regime of Workers and Employees in Wartime," dated June 26, 1941, introduced mandatory overtime: the workday for adults was extended up to 11 hours within a six-day work week. Essentially, the invasion of the USSR by fascist Germany triggered an even more severe tightening of labor discipline. As evidenced by Pirzhan Seitov and Nauryz Zhapakov, the role of the upper echelons of management intensified. The mechanism of concrete, detailed leadership—already fine-tuned before the war—began to operate with even greater strain. The system of "authorized representatives" (upolnomochennye) became widespread. In the auls and kishlaks, emergency organs—political departments of the Machine-Tractor Stations (MTS) and state farms (sovkhozes)—were re-established. Militarization involved the unconditional fulfillment of "plan-orders," disciplinary liability for any violations, and, where necessary, the introduction of a barracks-style regime.

With the onset of the war, the living and working conditions of rural residents deteriorated further. The

material well-being of rural laborers largely depended on the income of the collective farms and the volume of the harvest from their private subsidiary plots. However, because a significant portion of the collective farm harvest was surrendered to the state toward mandatory quotas after the war began, payments to peasants based on "labor days" (trudodni) were minimal. Consequently, their subsidiary plots—though significantly reduced in size following the aforementioned government decisions—became the sole means of survival for collective farmers. On these plots, they primarily sowed wheat, rice, zhugara (sorghum), sesame, mung beans (mash), millet, and a variety of traditional grains, which formed the family's reserves; a portion of this was sold at local markets. Part of the grain (wheat and zhugara) was ground into flour using traditional small hand-mills (digirman), the millstones of which were turned by hand. Every aul had ovens (tandyr) for baking bread. In organizing collective farm operations, the government attempted to centralize bread baking. On the eve of the war, the Republican Consumer Union (ResPO) had 47 bakeries at its disposal, 23 of which were leased from collective farms, with a daily baking capacity of 97 tons. Additionally, there were 23 state-owned tandyrs and 124 leased from collective farmers, with a daily capacity of 50 tons [13].

With the outbreak of the war, the state loan bonds of the Third Five-Year Plan (1938–1942), which had been issued earlier in 1941, were reclassified as a "War Loan." These were debt obligations issued by the state to cover the expenditures of military operations conducted by the armed forces [14]. Following the launch of an extensive campaign to raise funds for the Defense Fund, rural residents surrendered these bonds alongside gold valuables, cash, and warm clothing. For example, by September 15, 1941, the Defense Fund [15] in the Turtkul district received bonds totaling 200,730 rubles, 98,226 rubles in cash, as well as gold and silver items and jewelry [16]. Similarly, in the autumn of 1941, members of the "May 1st" and Lenin collective farms in the Nukus rural council subscribed to a cash-and-prize lottery in the amount of 2,000 rubles and contributed 1,050 rubles in cash to the Defense Fund [17].

Endless labor was demanded of rural residents to fulfill and exceed planned targets. According to the memoirs of veterans published in periodicals, collective farmers picked cotton during the day, and in the evening, they opened the cotton bolls (guza-paya), drying them in yurts and dugouts to deliver them to cotton collection points the following morning. Labor veteran U. Tleubergenov recalls that during the war years, "from early morning, people went to perform kazu (canal cleaning), plowed the land with oxen harnessed in yokes, dug the soil by hand, and sowed cotton, sorghum, rice, alfalfa, and barley. After delivering the harvested crop, they immediately returned to work. There was no good footwear or clothing; there was a shortage of bread and food. 'Sherim etik' (rawhide boots) would soak through in the rain and snow and fall off the feet. To keep the boots on, they were tied with ropes made of hemp (kendir). Many went to work completely barefoot" [18]. "The elderly, women, and children—everyone went out to the cotton fields," Tleubergenov continues. "During the late autumn harvest, they gathered unopened, frozen cotton bolls, spent the night opening them to extract the cotton, and delivered it early the next morning. In the summer, they went to mow alfalfa at dawn; if mown in the direct heat of the sun, the seeds would simply scatter. Upon returning from the fields, they worked on their own subsidiary plots, ate whatever was available for dinner, and by 2:00 or 3:00 AM, they were back out to harvest rice. In general, the people of that time spent 18 to 20 hours out of every 24-hour day laboring in the fields" [19].

From the beginning of the war, the labor shortage intensified at an accelerated pace. Consequently, regular school sessions were frequently disrupted, and students were often required to take their exams as external candidates. The collective farm fields saw the return of veterans, housewives, and students. For example, in the Turtkul district, a "Vos kresnik" (Sunday of voluntary labor) was organized for the cotton harvest, involving 10,434 participants. The entire sum earned that day (39,745 rubles) was donated to the Defense Fund [20]. Due to the labor shortage in the autumn of 1941, pupils and university students were mobilized for the cotton harvest. Academician S. Kamalov recalls that the autumn of 1941 marked the first time students were sent to pick cotton due to the war. Since that period, a tradition was established where students were deployed for weeding in the spring and harvesting in the autumn [21]. This is further corroborated by K. Kamalov, who notes that in the autumn of 1942, just a month and a half after the start of the academic year, the Secretary of the Regional Committee, O. Tatybaev, arrived at the institute to hold a meeting and immediately dispatched the students to the cotton fields [22].

Beginning in 1942, school-aged adolescents were mobilized for agricultural work on a massive scale. Initially, they were utilized for weeding cotton fields; in the summer, they were used for mowing wheat and gleaning ears of grain, and in the autumn, for the cotton harvest. For instance, newspapers of the period reported that "pupils of the Stalin incomplete

secondary school in the Kungrad district are actively participating in cotton cultivation and the grain harvest during their summer holidays, providing practical assistance to the collective farm" [23]. Reports from Shabbaz indicated that 200 schoolchildren were mobilized for agricultural work: 97 were gleaning wheat ears, while the remainder were engaged in cutting stalks. In the "Obkom" collective farm of the Kalinin rural council in the Kuybyshev district, 302 students entered the fields, while 56 students worked in the "Kyzyl Asker" collective farm, often completing one to two times the daily work norm. Labor days (trudodni) were credited to them; for example, in the "Komintern" collective farm of the 10th aul in the Kungrad district, students such as Karima Zhumabaeva and Mazlumkhan Taspolatova were credited with between 27 and 34 labor days.

On April 13, 1942, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) adopted Resolution No. 508, "On Increasing the Mandatory Minimum of Labor Days for Collective Farmers." The document stated that this measure was taken "to ensure the timely execution of all agricultural work in collective farms, thereby guaranteeing high yields and the further development of animal husbandry, providing collective farmers with higher in-kind and cash incomes per labor day, and supplying the country and the Red Army with sufficient food—which is particularly vital during the war against the German invaders." For cotton-growing regions, the mandatory minimum was set at 150 labor days (trudodni), whereas for other agricultural regions of the USSR, it was established at 100 or 120 days (specifically for central and certain mountainous areas). To ensure consistent labor throughout the agricultural cycle—including soil cultivation, sowing, crop maintenance, haymaking, harvesting, and livestock care—the resolution dictated a seasonal schedule for cotton regions: at least 30 labor days by May 15; 45 days from May 15 to September 1; 45 days from September 1 to November 1; and the remainder to be completed after November 1.

The resolution granted local Soviet-Party apparatuses the authority to increase or decrease these seasonal quotas by up to 20% based on local conditions. Furthermore, a mandatory annual minimum was established for adolescents—family members of collective farmers aged 12 to 16—at no less than 50 labor days per year. Failure to meet these minimums without a valid reason carried criminal penalties, including up to six months of corrective labor with a 25% garnishment of income in favor of the collective farm. Persistent refusal to comply with state directives resulted in expulsion from the collective farm and the forfeiture of one's private subsidiary plot [24].

In May 1943, the political departments of the Machine-Tractor Stations (MTS) and state farms (sovkhozes) were abolished. Starting in 1944, there was an intensified effort to strengthen the agricultural artel and restore democratic management forms, which had been neglected in many collective farms during the height of the wartime emergency.

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