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AGRICULTURE IN KARAKALPAKSTAN (1985–1991)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the development characteristics, key sectors, and production indicators of agriculture in Karakalpakstan between 1985 and 1991, as well as the economic and environmental problems that emerged in the field. The study examines the role of Karakalpakstan's agriculture within the Soviet planned economic system during the *Perestroika* (restructuring) era, the significance of cotton and rice cultivation as leading sectors, the state of livestock farming, and issues regarding irrigation and land reclamation systems. It also addresses the impact of the Aral Sea ecological crisis on agricultural production. Based on a comparative analysis of statistical data, the study identifies changes in cotton production volumes and cultivated areas between 1985 and 1990, the rise in rice yields, and trends in the production of grain and other agricultural commodities. The research findings indicate that while agricultural production levels were maintained, problems such as water scarcity, soil salinization, deteriorating land reclamation conditions, and the ecological crisis intensified significantly.

Keywords: Karakalpakstan, agriculture, restructuring, cotton growing, rice growing, livestock farming, irrigation, land reclamation.

Introduction

The period from 1985 to 1991 holds special significance in the history of the former Soviet Union as a time of intensifying political, economic, and social change. The policy of “perestroika” (restructuring), launched in 1985, impacted all sectors of the country's economy, including agriculture. This process was also reflected in the socio-economic life of Karakalpakstan.

Agriculture played a vital role in Karakalpakstan's economy. Due to the region's natural and geographical characteristics, farming was primarily dependent on irrigation systems. Located in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya River, the stability of agricultural production in Karakalpakstan was inextricably linked to water resource utilization and the condition of irrigation and collector-drainage networks.

During the Soviet era, Karakalpakstan's agriculture was heavily specialized in cotton and rice cultivation. While cotton was considered a crucial strategic raw material for the state, rice was a staple food crop that thrived in the region's unique natural conditions. At the same time, livestock farming, vegetable growing, melon cultivation, and other sectors also constituted significant components of the agricultural landscape. By the second half of the 1980s, long-standing problems in agriculture became increasingly apparent. Soil salinization on irrigated lands, water shortages, the technical condition of irrigation networks, and



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the receding level of the Aral Sea negatively impacted agricultural productivity. While cotton production in Karakalpakstan exceeded 361,000 tons in 1985, the figure stood at approximately 348,000 tons in 1990. The area dedicated to cotton cultivation also decreased during this period. However, an increase in yields was observed for certain crops, particularly rice.

The primary objective of this article is to conduct a historical-statistical analysis of the state of agriculture in Karakalpakstan between 1985 and 1991 and to identify the key problems that emerged during this period.

The research objectives are as follows:

- to examine the general state of agriculture in Karakalpakstan during 1985–1991;
- to analyze the development dynamics of cotton and rice cultivation;
- to review the production of grain and other agricultural products;
- to determine the role of livestock farming within the agricultural sector;
- to study issues related to irrigation and land reclamation;
- to analyze the impact of the Aral Sea region's ecological crisis on agriculture.

Research methodology

The study employs historical, systemic, comparative-historical, statistical, and analytical methods. To examine the processes occurring between 1985 and 1991, the research draws upon Soviet-era statistical compilations, scholarly studies, materials on agrarian history, and academic works dedicated to agriculture in Karakalpakstan.

The chronological scope of the study covers the years 1985 to 1991. While 1985 marks the beginning of the policy of *perestroika* (restructuring), the period concludes with Uzbekistan achieving state independence in 1991 and Karakalpakstan transitioning to a subsequent stage of development.

The study focused on the following key indicators for analysis:

1. cotton cultivation area and gross yield;
2. rice cultivation area, yield, and gross harvest;
3. production of grain and other crops;
4. condition of irrigated lands;
5. land reclamation and environmental issues.

An attempt was made to identify the main trends in agricultural changes by comparing statistical indicators.

Results

The role of cotton farming in agriculture.

Between 1985 and 1991, cotton farming remained one of the primary sectors of agriculture in Karakalpakstan. Cotton cultivation was organized based on state plans and played a significant role in the operations of collective farms (kolkhozes) and state farms (sovkhozes).

In 1985, the area dedicated to cotton cultivation in Karakalpakstan covered approximately 163.5 thousand hectares. By 1990, however, this figure had decreased to 153 thousand hectares. During the same period, the gross cotton

harvest fell from 361 thousand tons to 348 thousand tons. These figures indicate diminishing opportunities to increase production by expanding the acreage used for cotton farming. The condition of the soil—specifically its reclamation status—significantly influenced the development of the cotton industry. Soil salinization intensified in many of Karakalpakstan's irrigated areas, and the increased salt content in the soil negatively affected crop growth and yields.

Studies note that cotton yields in Karakalpakstan showed a downward trend starting in the second half of the 1970s. For instance, while the yield was around 31 centners per hectare in 1975, it dropped to 22.1 centners per hectare by 1985. Thus, the issue of developing cotton farming between 1985 and 1991 was linked not only to expanding cultivated areas but also to maintaining the fertility of existing lands and ensuring the efficient use of water.

The development of rice cultivation. Rice cultivation was one of the distinctive sectors of agriculture in Karakalpakstan. The natural conditions of the Amu Darya Delta created favorable opportunities for growing rice in certain areas. In 1985, the area dedicated to rice cultivation in Karakalpakstan totaled 98.1 thousand hectares, with a harvest of 259.1 thousand tons. By 1990, although the cultivated area had decreased to 80.7 thousand hectares, the total harvest reached 306.1 thousand tons. Yields rose from 26.4 centners per hectare to 37.9 centners per hectare.

These data lead to an important conclusion: in some instances, it was possible to increase production volumes not merely by expanding cultivated areas, but also by improving agrotechnical practices and boosting yields. The issue of seed production was also of great importance in the rice sector. In the late 1980s, efforts were undertaken in Karakalpakstan to cultivate rice varieties suited to local conditions and to establish a seed base for them. In particular, increased yields were achieved as a result of the work carried out on rice seed production at the “Shortanbay” state farm.

Experience with rice cultivation in Karakalpakstan demonstrates the significant impact of scientific approaches, variety selection, seed production, and agrotechnical practices on agricultural productivity.

In addition to cotton and rice, crops such as grain, potatoes, vegetables, and melons were also cultivated in Karakalpakstan's agricultural sector.

According to statistical data, the total gross grain harvest was approximately 1.54 million tons in 1985, rising to nearly 2.04 million tons by 1990. Potato production also increased from 240.7 thousand tons in 1985 to 336.4 thousand tons in 1990, while vegetable production grew from 2.39 million tons to 2.84 million tons during the same period.

These figures indicate that agricultural production was not limited solely to cotton cultivation; food production was also a key component of the agricultural sector. However, when evaluating these statistics, it is essential to consider the calculation methodology and how the data relates to figures compiled for the entire Uzbek SSR. Consequently, data for specific farms or districts may differ from republic-wide indicators. Livestock Farming

Livestock farming has long been a traditional sector of agriculture in Karakalpakstan. The region's desert and pasture zones provided natural conditions suitable for livestock rearing, particularly sheep farming. Karakalpakstan saw the development of Karakul sheep farming, general sheep and cattle raising, horse breeding, and camel husbandry. Pastures and natural vegetation in the Amu Darya delta and surrounding areas served as the primary source of fodder for livestock. However, the development of the livestock sector was directly linked to the availability of a fodder base. The allocation of a significant portion of irrigated land to cotton and other crops impacted the capacity for fodder cultivation. Furthermore, the deterioration of the ecological situation in the Aral Sea region affected the condition of pastures. Water supply challenges and changes in vegetation cover created additional difficulties for the livestock sector.

Irrigation and Land Reclamation.

The development of agriculture in Karakalpakstan is inconceivable without irrigation systems. Farming in the region relies primarily on water from the Amu Darya River. In the second half of the 1980s, irrigation systems faced two major challenges: a shortage of water resources and the deterioration of the reclamation status of irrigated lands.

Soil salinity posed a serious problem for agriculture in Karakalpakstan. Salt accumulation in the soil intensified due to rising groundwater levels during irrigation, inadequate drainage system performance, and water evaporation.

The function of reclamation systems was to drain groundwater, prevent salinization, and maintain the fertility of agricultural land. However, the technical condition of existing systems was not consistently effective across all areas. Consequently, the issue of the efficiency of water and land resource utilization in agricultural production became increasingly critical.

Discussion

Research findings indicate that contradictory processes were at play in Karakalpakstan's agriculture between 1985 and 1991.

On one hand, positive indicators were observed in certain areas of agricultural production. In particular, rising yields in rice cultivation demonstrated the potential to utilize intensive factors in agricultural production. On the other hand, the reduction of cultivated areas and the decline in total output in the cotton sector—compounded by soil salinization, water shortages, and land reclamation issues—exposed the weaknesses of the prevailing agricultural management system.

Given that Karakalpakstan's agriculture had long been heavily specialized in cotton cultivation, the issue of crop composition balance was also significant. Because cotton production was inextricably linked to state quotas, farms had limited autonomy to determine their crop mix based on local needs or natural conditions.

During the **Perestroika** (restructuring) era, the agenda focused on refining agricultural management mechanisms, increasing material incentives linked to labor outcomes, and improving production efficiency.

However, as the 1985–1991 period was historically brief, many of the systemic changes were not fully realized. Furthermore, it is incorrect to attribute agricultural problems solely to the operations of the farms themselves. The ecological and geographical conditions of Karakalpakstan, the system of water resource utilization in the Aral Sea basin, and policies regarding centralized planning and irrigation have also significantly influenced agricultural development.

In this context, the period from 1985 to 1991 stands out in the history of Karakalpakstan's agriculture as a time when production capacity was maintained, yet the ecological and economic limitations of the previous agricultural development model intensified.

Conclusion

From 1985 to 1991, agriculture in Karakalpakstan operated as an integral part of the Soviet economic system. During this period, cotton and rice cultivation remained the primary sectors, while livestock farming, grain production, vegetable growing, and other areas also played significant roles in agricultural output.

Research findings indicate a decline in both cultivated area and gross yield for cotton during this period. This was driven by factors such as soil salinization, water supply issues, and a general deterioration of the ecological situation. In contrast, despite reductions in cultivated area during certain years, rice farming saw an increase in productivity. This highlights the importance of employing effective agrotechnical practices, quality seed management, and crop varieties suited to local conditions. One of the major challenges facing agriculture in Karakalpakstan was the state of irrigation and land reclamation systems. High rates of water resource consumption, soil salinization, and the drying up of the Aral Sea severely impacted the ecological sustainability of agricultural production.

The experience of 1985–1991 demonstrates that agricultural development in Karakalpakstan involves more than simply increasing production volumes.

The rational use of water resources, the improvement of land reclamation conditions, the balancing of crop composition, and the consideration of environmental factors were intended to be key components of agrarian policy. Overall, the period from 1985 to 1991 marked the final stage of the Soviet planned economic system in the history of Karakalpakstan's agriculture; during this time, problems associated with the previous production model intensified, and the historical groundwork was laid for the agrarian reforms of the subsequent independence era.

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