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Railway Construction and Socio-Economic Transformation in the Lower Amu Darya Region: A Historical and Anthropological Study

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Abstract

The construction of the Chorjoi-Kungroat railway, which was one of the first railway networks in the Lower Amu Darya region, undoubtedly played an invaluable role in the socio-economic life of the region. After all, at that time it allowed connecting the Khorezm region with various regions of the republic and the former Soviet Union, which determined the socio-economic development of the region not only at that time, but also in the future. This article attempts to reveal the construction of the Chorjoi-Kungroat railway and its significance in the socio-economic life of not only the region, but also the country, based on a comparative analysis of archival sources and historical research data.

Keywords: anthropology, Lower Amu Darya region, Khorezm region, railways, Chorjoi, Urgench, Toshsoqa, Kungrot, A. Abdurakhmanov, national hashari, station, station

Introduction

Attempts to lay railway tracks in the Lower Amu Darya region were undertaken from the 1880s. Despite the development of numerous projects, for various reasons, the construction of a railway in the oasis was not carried out until the 1950s. Of course, there were several reasons for this. In particular, when, at the end of the previous century, the necessity of connecting Central Asia with the European railway network through continuous railway communication was recognized, the question of choosing a route arose: should the eastern line from Orenburg to Tashkent or the western line from Saratov through Aleksandrov Gai and Khiva to Chorjuy (Chorjo`y station near Bukhara) have been built first? As is known from

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history, the tsarist government first proceeded with the construction of the Tashkent railway line. As a result, although the project for a line through the Khiva Khanate had already been developed, this route remained without funding because, as noted above, construction of the Orenburg–Tashkent railway had begun. There was also another railway communication project with the khanate — the Caspian–Aral line, intended to connect the Caspian and Aral Seas. However, this project was also redirected from the Aral Sea toward Tashkent, as a result of which the territory of the khanate once again remained outside the railway lines.

The third was the Saratov–Khiva–India line project. In 1874, in issue No. 34 of the well-known weekly magazine "Niva", Baranovsky's project was published, advocating the necessity of the earliest possible construction of a railway from Saratov to India. Here, it should be recalled that by that time the Ryazan–Ural Railway had already reached Saratov, but a crossing over the Volga did not yet exist. In addition, the Trans-Volga lines of the Ryazan–Ural Railway were also absent. At that time, only the construction of a line from Pokrovskaya Sloboda to Elton was being discussed, which was supposed to become a narrow-gauge railway for transporting salt. However, the designer Baranovsky presented the final result of his project as a completely different railway network. Thus, this project also remained only in drawings and theoretical developments.

Review of the Literature

From the 1850s–1860s, when the Russian Empire began to subjugate the territories of Central Asia, plans for constructing railways in the regions to be conquered became one of the top priorities of the empire's ruling circles. In this regard, a number of projects for the construction of railways in the territory of Central Asia, including the Khiva Khanate, were developed. These projects themselves constitute the primary sources on this subject, the content and essence of which must first be analyzed. In particular, among the early projects, the construction of a railway was envisaged, firstly, along the old caravan routes of Ustyurt, and secondly, between the Caspian and Aral Seas (Glinsky, 1899; Orenburg Scientific Archival Commission, 1856–1857; Khrulev, 1882; Zheleznye dorogi v Sredniuiu Aziiu, 1874; Khrulev, 1863). In addition, the tsarist government of Russia considered a project for the construction of the Indo-Volga Railway, which was to pass specifically through Ustyurt (Baranovsky, 1874).

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The second group of sources on the subject consists of documents, articles, and studies devoted to the construction of railway networks in the Trans-Caspian region from the beginning of the 20th century, the routes connecting Central Asia with Siberia, and the Orenburg–Tashkent railway system, as well as their subsequent operation. This group includes the works of such researchers as E. Zimmerman, A.I. Rodzevich, B.B. Glinsky, I.O. Shukshintsev, V.V. Andreevsky, and A.O. Brickelmeier (Lapshinsky, 1927, pp. 24–26; Sergeev, 1927; Socialisticheskoe obiazatelstvo stroitelei zheleznoi dorogi Chardzhou–Kungrad, 1947, p. 6; Khalfin, 1963, pp. 445–457; Dmitriev-Mamontov, 1915; Shukshintsev, 1906, pp. 149–175).

The most important study reflecting attempts to construct a railway in the Khiva Khanate is the reference memorandum by A.N. Kovalevsky. This work presents the specialist's considerations regarding the projected railway routes in the Khiva Khanate, as well as his conclusions about the future political and economic significance of these railways (Kovalevsky, 1915).

Studies from the Soviet period include the works of A.I. Sergeev, F.I. Zavarkina, N.A. Khalfin, and Z.K. Akhmadzhanova (Ahmadjonova, 1965; Gosplan UzSSR, 1935; Sergeev, 1927; Khalfin, 1963, pp. 445–457).

Among contemporary studies on this subject, the articles and works of D.V. Vasilyev, R. Karimov, K. Rakhmonov, K. Nurzhonov, T. Safarov, M.M. Makhmudov, and F. Jumaniyozov should be mentioned (Vasilyev & Vasilyev, 2025, pp. 442–459; Jumaniyozov, 2020; Karimov, 1993; Mahmudov, 2013, pp. 33–43; Narodnoi stroike – bolshevistskie tempy, 1947; Rahmonov et al., 1992; Safarov, 2008, pp. 79–82).

Methodology

The article uses such scientific research methods as systematization, historical-comparative analysis, generalization of historical information, as well as the principle of objectivity.

Analysis and Results

After the victorious conclusion of the war, in an atmosphere of spiritual uplift in the country, proposals for laying railway tracks in Khorezm were once again put forward. The region and the entire Lower Amu Darya region received only a small

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quantity of goods of national economic importance from the center and were practically deprived of the opportunity to export their own raw materials. Navigation on the Amu Darya was in a state of crisis and could ensure the transportation of only small volumes of cargo. Thus, in 1947, when the region's demand for grain products amounted to 76.200 tons, the Central Asian River Fleet delivered 8475 tons of grain, and 17.340 tons of petroleum products instead of the required 50 thousand tons. In particular, due to the shortage of gasoline, the vehicles of the "Uzkhoptrans" trust practically came to a standstill. Therefore, in July 1947, only 33,4 % of the planned amount of raw cotton was exported from the Khorezm region, and 15,2 % from Karakalpakstan (Kzyl Karakalpakstan, 1947).

Deputy A. Abdurakhmanov, who participated in the session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on March 21, 1947, criticized the backward state of the district's economy, caused by the absence of a railway in the Khorezm oasis, and placed the issue of connecting the oasis to the railway network on the agenda (Abdurakhmanov, 1947). The situation in the Lower Amu Darya region was discussed at meetings of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on March 10 and 16, 1947. Based on the decision of the Ministry of Railways of the USSR dated March 18, 1947, specialist engineers A. Mironenko, S. Kvartirkin, and N. Didenko from the Dnipropetrovsk (Ukraine) branch of the "Soyuztransproekt" design institute surveyed the section from Chorjuy to Kungrad for four months, traveling on foot and on horseback.

The specialists concluded that the construction of railway tracks would be hindered by the soft soils of the Khorezm oasis, the shallow depth of groundwater, as well as the large number of canals, irrigation ditches, drainage ditches, and lakes. Therefore, on the basis of the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR dated July 28, 1947, "On the Construction of the Chorjuy – Urgench – Kungrad Railway", the Ministry of Railways was initially permitted to construct the section from Chorjuy to Tashsaka. However, subsequent surveys demonstrated the possibility of laying a railway through the oasis to Kungrad. On June 17 of the same year, the design documentation was developed and approved (Socialisticheskoe obiazatelstvo stroitelei zheleznoi dorogi Chardzhou–Kungrad, 1947, p. 6).

An association for the construction of the "Chorjuy – Urgench – Kungrad" railway was established under the Ministry of Transport of the USSR, and Gani Khodjaev was appointed as its head. Experienced specialists M.I. Tranis, Kh. Turdiev, A.A.

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Korakhojaev, N.F. Kalabugin, E.A. Rukhlis, A. Churliboev, G.P. Lazarev, A.I. Orlov, S. Rakhimboev, A.I. Mushenkov, Sh. Jumaniyozov, F.I. Blintsov, N.I. Solovyov, V.M. Yakovlev, K.F. Rukhadze, A.G. Melikhov, and V.I. Pustovoit were mobilized for the construction at the direction of the ministry. Construction materials and equipment began arriving at the construction administration from Ukraine, Belarus, the Urals, Siberia, and other regions, along with construction workers. The base for assembling railway track components, organized near Chorjuy, was managed by Semen Sarzhevsky, an Honorary Railway Worker of the USSR (Seitimbetov, 1994; Kovalevsky, 1915).

A railway construction administration for the section up to Tashsaka was organized in Chorjuy, and large-scale construction work began. From Uzbekistan, 30 thousand people, and from Turkmenistan, 10 thousand people submitted applications to participate in the construction for a period of three months. A total of 509.246.700 rubles was allocated for the construction, of which 217,0 million rubles was planned to be spent on the first stage of construction of the Chorjuy – Urgench section (Chardzhou–Kungrad, 1947). To provide the construction participants with drinking water from the river, camel caravans carrying special containers (barrels) were organized. A total of 101 vehicles, as well as equipment, were supplied to the construction administration from Ukraine, Belarus, the Urals, Altai, Siberia, and other regions; construction workers, doctors, and representatives of household and cultural services from more than 600 organizations began arriving. Construction materials, including 200 wagons of sleepers and 130 wagons of boards, were delivered to the base for assembling railway track components organized near Chorjuy (Khorezm Regional State Archive, n.d.). Workers of the "Uzbekistan" collective farm, located in the Urgench district, manufactured ketmens and carts for the Khorezm participants of the hashar (Po Khorezmskoi oblasti, 1947).

The population of the Khorezm oasis and the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic welcomed the government decision on the construction of the railway with great joy. Since restoration work was continuing in the western regions destroyed and looted by the fascists, and there was a shortage of machinery and necessary equipment, it was planned to carry out the main construction work through the method of a nationwide hashar, relying on the experience of the construction of Turksib, the Great Fergana Canal, and the Tashsaka Canal (Po Khorezmskoi oblasti, 1947).

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According to the resolution signed by the chairman of the Khorezm Regional Executive Committee and the head of the construction headquarters, Madirim Rakhmonov (the first secretary of the regional party committee in 1950–1960), a "Nationwide Hashar" was declared from August 22 to October 15. At the initiative of members of the Kuibyshev collective farm in the Urgench district, peasants expressed their willingness to work selflessly on the forthcoming construction. This initiative received widespread support from workers in the Khorezm and Tashauz regions, as well as Karakalpakstan. One week before the arrival at the designated locations of the participants of the hashar, consisting of workers, collective farmers, and residents of settlements located near the route, 72 teahouses, 146 shops, 56 canteens, 200 tandyrs, 7 bathhouses, 45 hairdressing salons, 130 workshops for sewing clothes and making footwear, 20 medical and 45 feldsher stations, a hospital with 385 beds, 32 post offices, and many other household and cultural service institutions had been prepared (Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, n.d.).

On August 15, the government commission accepted the completed work. From August 26, 1947, participants in the construction were transported to the sections where railway tracks were to be laid by vessels of the Amu Darya flotilla, automobiles, carts, and some representatives of the working population by aircraft. Their number continuously increased: on September 3, it amounted to 46,0 thousand people, on September 13 — 65.175, and in the following days reached 70 thousand. Of the hashar participants, 55 thousand arrived from Uzbekistan and 15 thousand from Turkmenistan (Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, n.d.).

Mobile field editions of the newspapers "Khorezm Haqiqati" and "Kizil Uzbekistan" were published. Reports on achievements were printed in the form of leaflets and, together with newspapers, were dropped from aircraft early in the morning, thus being delivered to workers along the entire route. Agitators and propagandists, poets and writers, and figures of the arts contributed to organizing полноценный recreation and leisure activities for the construction participants. Events related to the construction of the railway were covered not only at the regional and republican levels but also throughout the former Union. In particular, articles about this were published in the central newspapers "Pravda", "Izvestia", and "Komsomolskaya Pravda".

No railway in the world was built under such difficult conditions as the Chorjuy–Kungrad railway: without the use of machinery, exclusively through manual labor,

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thanks to the courage of thousands of people. Of the first 399 kilometers of the projected Chorjuy–Urgench section, 260 kilometers passed through the shifting sand dunes of the Karakum Desert and the difficult sections of the Tuyamuyun ridge (Qoraev, 1952).

In June 1950, the first rails were laid at the Urgench railway station. Over one and a half years of intensive labor, work on an unprecedented scale was completed (Rahmonov et al., 1992).

On December 18, 1952, a ceremonial reception of the first train took place at Urgench station (Rokhmonov, 1963). Regular transportation of national economic goods and passengers began on the 400-kilometer section of the Ashgabat Railway between Urgench and Chorjuy (Qoraev, 1952).

As a result of the construction of the railway, not only did supplies of goods of national economic importance, machinery, equipment, and fertilizers to the Karakalpak ASSR, Khorezm and Tashauz regions increase, but opportunities for exporting raw materials and products from these regions (cotton, rice, silk, oil and fat products, melon-growing products, horticultural products, livestock products, etc.) also expanded. In 1952–1955, 163 residential buildings were constructed in the city of Urgench, and 40 two-story and 20 one-story residential buildings were built in the railway workers' settlement (Rahmonov et al., 1992; Chardzhou–Kungrad, 1947).

The plant built to produce construction materials for the railway and the new station building was transformed by 1955 into an enterprise producing 30 million fired bricks and 20 thousand reinforced concrete structures annually. With the emergence of the railway in the oasis, transportation of raw materials for production developed. In 1958–1965, as a result of the emergence of such industrial sectors as textile production and agricultural product processing, 70 industrial enterprises were put into operation, and production output increased 3.5 times. Agricultural development also became more active. If 1200 tons of fertilizers were delivered to the oasis in 1939 to improve the land's reclamation condition, by 1969 this figure had reached 200 thousand tons. In 1958–1964, thanks to the increased volume of construction material transportation by rail, 2076 km of gas pipelines, 473 km of asphalt roads, secondary schools with a capacity of 23819 places, preschool

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educational institutions with a capacity of 29300 places, and a hospital with 500 beds were constructed (Rahmonov et al., 1992).

On February 21, 1953, a signaling and communication distance unit (ShCh) was also established in Urgench (Mahmudov, 2013, pp. 33–43).

The Urgench locomotive depot, established on April 10, 1953, was assigned the tasks of repairing diesel locomotives and ensuring their stable and safe operation within the serviced section of the railway. Diesel locomotives of the Urgench depot began carrying out passenger and freight transportation on the section up to Dargan-Ata (187 km), and subsequently on the Chorjuy–Kungrad section (627 km). However, in 1959, the depot was closed, and diesel locomotive repairs began to be carried out in Chorjuy. This situation, caused by the considerable distance from the repair base and high transportation costs, was eliminated 10 years later, in 1969. The Urgench diesel locomotive depot was restored and began serving the entire Lower Amu Darya region (Mahmudov, 2013, pp. 33–43).

Work on extending the railway tracks in the oasis continued. On December 28, 1953, train traffic to Khojayli was opened. On June 29, 1955, the first train to Kungrad was driven by Vitaly Fyodorovich Demchenko, a locomotive driver from the Urgench depot and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the Uzbek SSR. On July 24, 1955, the second stage of the Chorjuy–Kungrad railway, with a total length of 627 km, was put into operation. As a result, 33,6 thousand passengers were served in 1958 (Rokhmonov, 1963).

The development of the railway system began to have a positive impact on the social life of the oasis. In 1953, a railway hospital was built in Urgench, which began providing medical care not only to workers and employees of railway enterprises but also to the city's population. The Urgench Railway Hospital was designed for 200 beds. The activities of the polyclinic were primarily aimed at dispensary monitoring of patients with diseases identified during medical examinations, disease prevention, and functional diagnostics (Rahmonov et al., 1992; Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, n.d.).

The “Urgench Excavator” plant, established in 1963 and under the authority of the Urgench railway station, was assigned the tasks of manufacturing spare parts for

railway cars and gondola cars, non-standard equipment and metal structures, as well as providing services to the population (Rokhmonov, 1963).

In 1963, the Central Asian Administration was established on the basis of the administrations of the Tashkent and Trans-Caspian Railways. It included the railways of the republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as the Chimkent region of Kazakhstan and the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan (Rokhmonov, 1963).

Alongside the achievements, shortcomings and tragic incidents also occurred. At 3 hours 25 minutes on the night of April 26, 1963, a freight train traveling from the direction of Shavat collided with a shunting train located on the first track of Urgench station. The brothers Anatoly and Marat Ibragimov, who were operating the diesel locomotive, fell asleep and, failing to notice the semaphore's prohibitory signal, passed it. The freight train, entering the station at a speed of 50 km/h, collided with the shunting diesel locomotive. As a result of the accident, both locomotive drivers died, as did the driver of the shunting diesel locomotive, A.D. Baklashkin. The assistant driver of the shunting diesel locomotive, A. Khudaiberganov, became disabled and underwent long-term treatment (Rokhmonov, 1963).

The causes of the 1963 tragedy were established, and the necessary conclusions were drawn on their basis. After M.M. Rudenko was appointed head of the Urgench diesel locomotive depot, on his initiative, a “Public Control Group” consisting of 72 specialists was established, and experienced locomotive driver K.S. Peregonchuk was elected as its head. The group members took railway traffic safety under their control (Rahmonov et al., 1992; Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, n.d.).

In 1967, construction began on the 408 km-long Kungrad–Beyneu railway. By 1970, the railway cars of trains traveling from Urgench to Tashkent were outdated, with hard seats and no heating; at night, passengers lacked sufficient bedding. There were few compartment cars, a small number of reserved-seat cars, while the majority consisted of general cars. At the same time, it was impossible to find out the serial numbers of the railway cars in advance. Tickets were not sold at small stations and sidings, and where ticket sales were available, tickets were mainly obtained by the cashiers' acquaintances. In addition, conductors often did not even open the doors of the railway cars. As a result, passengers who had difficulty getting into any

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available railway car were forced to travel to Chorjuy in vestibules (the spaces connecting railway cars) or on the roofs of trains (Rahmonov et al., 1992; Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, n.d.).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Practically all projects related to the idea of constructing a railway in the Khiva Khanate envisaged a connection with the city of Chorjuy. The main reason was that Chorjuy was also the principal city on the waterway along the Amu Darya. Prior to this, transport communication in the oasis was carried out through caravan and water routes.

In general, the history of the construction of the Chorjuy–Kungrad railway and its role in the socio-economic life of the oasis require in-depth scientific analysis. There is a considerable number of studies on this subject and, in particular, archival documents that require careful examination. Their comprehensive study will make it possible to reveal more fully one of the most relevant problems in the history of the Khorezm oasis.

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