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At the Epicenter of Virgin Lands Development: The Grandiose Campaign in the Assessment of an Ordinary Participant, 1954–68

Abstract

This article contains a small, previously unpublished excerpt from the typewritten manuscript of the Orenburg pervotseinnik (first virgin lands volunteer) Alexander Ferapontovich Plokhotnichenko (1918–2001). The memoirs materials presented in the article were written in the late 1990s, shortly before the author's death. In fact, these are memoirs-reflections, a significant part of which relates to the time of the mass development of virgin and fallow lands on the territory of the Adamovka district of the Orenburg region. On the pages of his manuscript, the author rethought most significant events and phenomena of the “virgin lands” decade in the difficult days of post-Soviet reality. Within the framework of this study, a brief historiographical overview of scholarship on colossal memoir heritage of the virgin lands era is presented. The published excerpt from the manuscript of A. F. Plokhotnichenko is unique in terms of content, since analytical memoirs are extremely rare among the memoir sources of the virgin lands era. In the Orenburg region such materials are not to be found. The article is to provide comprehensive analysis of the presented fragment of A.F. Plokhotnichenko's memoirs as an exceptional historical source on the history of the virgin lands development. The scientific value of this documentary publication is due to the author's long-term participation in the large-scale development campaign. When working with memoirs, specific historical and historical-typological approaches have been used. They permit, on the one hand, to consider the memoirs as an original retrospective text containing specific factual information and, on the other, to analyze the transmitted socio-historical experience. The author of the memoirs underscored the “trouble spots” of the epoch-making development campaign, its obvious mistakes and miscalculations. Having an opportunity to evaluate the virgin lands epic in a broad historical retrospect, A.F. Plokhotnichenko wondered what the Orenburg region and the country as a whole had gained from the massive development of new lands. Memoirs are published in abbreviated form. Nevertheless, the editing did not distort the general meaning of the materials left by A.F. Plokhotnichenko, did not change his reasoning and main conclusions. Their introduction into scientific use may contribute to expansion of the source base and formation of a more objective perception of the history of the virgin lands development. Despite their pronounced subjectivity, memoirs can be of undoubted interest to both specialists (primarily historians and local historians) and to a wide range of researchers.

## Keywords

Virgin lands development, virgin lands daily life, Soviet virgin lands volunteer, mistakes in virgin lands development, consequences of the virgin lands era, testimony of the first virgin lands volunteer, historical source, lessons of the virgin lands campaign.

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