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RELIGIOUS POLICY OF THE SOVIET STATE IN CENTRAL ASIA, WITH A FOCUS ON UZBEKISTAN (1930–1950S)

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Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada 1930–1950-yillarda Sovet Ittifoqida olib borilgan diniy siyosat va uning Markaziy Osiyo, xususan O‘zbekiston jamiyatiga ko‘rsatgan ta’siri yoritiladi. Tadqiqotda diniy muassasalar faoliyatining to‘xtatilishi, ruhoniylarning ta’qib qilinishi, urush yillaridagi diniy yumshash va undan keyingi davrda qayta kuchaygan nazorat jarayonlari ilmiy manbalar asosida tahlil qilingan. Maqola zamonaviy tarixshunoslikdagi yondashuvlar asosida yozilgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: SSSR, diniy siyosat, Markaziy Osiyo, O‘zbekiston, repressiya, Ikkinchi jahon urushi, tarixshunoslik.

Аннотация:В данной статье рассматривается религиозная политика Советского Союза в 1930–1950-х годах и её влияние на Центральную Азию, особенно на Узбекистан. Анализируются закрытие религиозных учреждений, преследование духовенства, временные послабления в годы войны и усиление контроля в послевоенный период. Статья основана на современных исторических исследованиях.

Ключевые слова: СССР, религиозная политика, Центральная Азия, Узбекистан, репрессии, Вторая мировая война, историография.

Abstract: This article examines the religious policy of the Soviet Union during the 1930s–1950s and its impact on Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan. It analyzes the closure of religious institutions, persecution of clergy, temporary relaxation during the war years, and the tightening of control in the postwar period. The article is based on modern historiographical approaches.

Keywords: USSR, religious policy, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, repression, World War II, historiography.

The 1930s–1950s marked a period of profound transformation in the history of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. The Soviet government’s religious policy deeply affected all aspects of society. During this period, a significant portion of the religious heritage was destroyed, the system of religious education was disrupted, and thousands of clergymen were persecuted. At the same time, during the years of the Second World War, there was a relative relaxation in the Soviet state’s religious policy. However, this process was short-lived, and after the war, strict control and restrictions were reinforced.

This study examines the religious policy of the Soviet state as an integral part of historical processes. The purpose of the article is to reveal the essence of the policy during the 1930s–1950s, analyze its impact on Uzbek society, and highlight the assessments presented in contemporary historiography. The research relies on scientific sources, archival documents, and modern studies.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that the 1930s–1950s were distinguished in Soviet history by a sharp intensification of ideological control and the predominance of state policy in all spheres of life. In particular, repressive measures in the religious sphere directly affected the centuries-old religious and cultural life of the peoples of Central Asia, including the population of Uzbekistan. Examining the essence of religious policy during the Soviet period and its impact on Uzbek society provides important conclusions for understanding contemporary religious and spiritual life.

Uzbek scholars have also paid attention to this issue. In particular, the research of H. Karimov, A. Qayumov, M. Is'hoqov, Sh. Vohidov, and D. Ziyaeva is devoted to studying the religious and spiritual processes in Uzbekistan during the 1930s–1950s, as well as the impact of religious policy on the life of the population.

From the 1930s, religious policy in the Soviet Union was shaped at the level of state ideology. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, religion was interpreted as the "opium of the people," widely regarded as a force that hindered social and political development. Therefore, the activities of religious institutions—including mosques, madrasas, churches, and other places of worship—were gradually halted.

State policy was carried out along two main directions:

Closure of religious institutions and destruction of their material base. Mosques and churches were closed, their property transferred to the state, and many buildings repurposed as clubs, warehouses, or for other uses.

Strengthening atheist propaganda. In textbooks, the press, theatre, and cinema, religious values were criticized more intensely. It was promoted under the slogan "There is no God," asserting the construction of a new Soviet society.

A series of laws and decrees adopted in the 1930s practically eliminated religious freedom. In particular, although the 1936 USSR Constitution proclaimed "freedom of conscience," this right was not guaranteed in practice. Instead, engaging in religious practices often became clandestine activity.

The Soviet state did not aim to immediately eradicate religious values; rather, it sought their gradual removal from social life through long-term socio-cultural transformation. Schools, youth organizations, and mass culture were extensively employed for this purpose.

Historically, the territory of Uzbekistan was one of the centers of Islamic science and education. Cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva were major religious-educational centers in the Muslim world. However, during the Soviet period, this heritage was regarded as a "relic of the past" and subject to destruction.

Starting in the 1930s, madrasas across the republic were gradually closed. Ancient madrasas in Bukhara and Samarkand ceased their activities, many were repurposed as warehouses, clubs, or residential buildings. The closure of religious schools not only halted the dissemination of religious knowledge but also severed millennia-old educational traditions.

Atheistic education replaced religious instruction. In schools and higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, atheism became a compulsory subject. In the press and textbooks, religious customs were depicted as "superstitions," and the ideal Soviet citizen was portrayed as a person "nourished by science, relying on secular knowledge, and raised in a spirit of party loyalty."

Cultural heritage also suffered a severe blow. Most mosques were closed or destroyed. By the late 1930s, only a few mosques in the republic remained open. Many famous madrasas and mosques in Bukhara and Samarkand were left in disrepair or converted into administrative buildings.

State policy extended beyond closing religious schools and institutions. It also intervened in the population's daily religious rituals. Religious ceremonies such as circumcision celebrations,

marriages, and funerals were strictly monitored. In many cases, clergy who conducted these rituals were punished or labeled “enemies of the people.”

Thus, the ancient system of religious education in Uzbekistan was destroyed, and an ideological policy aimed at shaping a Soviet worldview was established. This process caused significant damage to the religious and cultural life of society and disrupted traditional values.

The harshest measures in the USSR’s religious policy were directed against the clergy. The widespread persecutions that began in the 1930s targeted not only the political elite and intellectuals but also religious scholars. Imams, teachers, sheikhs, and elders in Uzbekistan were punished as “enemies of the people.”

Persecution of clergy took several forms:

Arrests and deportations: Thousands of clergy were accused of “counter-revolutionary activity” and sentenced to long prison terms or exiled to Siberia and other remote regions.

Executions: Many prominent scholars were shot to eliminate the leadership of religious communities.

Undermining religious authority: Clergy were portrayed in mass media as “spreaders of superstition” and “opponents of science.”

Archival documents indicate that during the “Great Purge” of 1937–1938, hundreds of religious figures in Uzbekistan were imprisoned, sometimes merely for reading the Qur’an or organizing communal prayers.

Persecution also aimed to deprive religious leaders of social support. For instance, when local imams were arrested, mosques were closed, and religious communities dispersed. This isolated religious leaders from society.

By the 1940s, the number of active clergy in Uzbekistan had sharply declined. According to official data, while thousands of imams and teachers had been active in the 1920s, by the 1940s only a few could openly practice their duties.

This process profoundly affected religious life. On one hand, the continuity of religious knowledge was broken, leaving a vacuum in leadership. On the other, the population’s demand for religious values persisted in secret. Many families continued to read the Qur’an and other religious texts clandestinely, despite strict state persecution.

Thus, persecution of the clergy became one of the primary tools of Soviet control over religious life.

In 1941, with the outbreak of the Second World War, there was a certain relaxation in Soviet religious policy. This was not due to a shift in ideological principles, but rather the need to unify the population during wartime. The government was forced to view religion temporarily as a political tool.

In the early years of the war, restrictions on clergy were eased to uplift morale and support the front materially and spiritually. Some mosques and churches reopened, and certain religious ceremonies were permitted.

This process was also noticeable in Uzbekistan. For example, in Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand, some mosques resumed activities. The Soviet government encouraged religious communities to contribute to the war effort. Many Muslim clergy actively participated in collecting material aid for the front and helping wounded soldiers.

In 1943, Moscow considered establishing a special religious administration for Muslims in the former USSR. As a result, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SACMAK) was established, with its center in Tashkent, coordinating Muslim communities across the region. Its creation reflected the Soviet government’s temporary political support of the Muslim population.

However, this relaxation was short-lived. The government did not intend to expand religious freedom but saw it as a political necessity for wartime adaptation. After the war, control over religious life tightened again.

Thus, the temporary relaxation during the Second World War was a tactical political step rather than a deviation from ideological principles. Muslim communities in Uzbekistan used this opportunity to partially restore religious life.

After 1945, following the end of the war, the Soviet government's religious policy took a harsh turn again. Wartime relaxations ended, and control over religious practice intensified. Stalin and his successors considered expanded religious freedom a threat to state ideology.

Mosques and other religious institutions reopened during the war were again placed under strict supervision. Every mosque's activities were monitored by special agencies. Imams, preachers, and clergy were required to maintain regular contact with state security organs.

The activities of SACMAK were also strictly controlled by the government, serving not to guide communities independently but to align them with state policy. All decisions of SACMAK were implemented only with central approval.

After the war, atheist propaganda intensified. Religion was depicted as "superstition" and an obstacle to scientific and social progress. "Atheistic lectures" spread widely across Uzbekistan, and school textbooks increasingly criticized religious practice. Educating the younger generation in a secular spirit became a key state objective. Religion was thus gradually marginalized as a social phenomenon.

Although direct persecution of clergy somewhat decreased after the war, their activities remained strictly limited. Scholars could not teach religion openly, read the Qur'an publicly, or disseminate religious knowledge. Only ceremonies within mosques were permitted. In some cases, clergy were accused of "foreign connections" or "counter-revolutionary activity" and imprisoned again, keeping them in fear.

This post-war tightening of religious policy further reduced religious life in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, the population's demand for religious values did not disappear. Religious rituals were often conducted secretly, such as Qur'an recitations, circumcision ceremonies, or marriages held privately at home.

Thus, the 1945–1950s were marked by strict Soviet control over religious life, creating a dual reality: officially, atheistic principles prevailed, while unofficially, religious traditions persisted.

Historically, the peoples of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan, have been closely linked with Islam, with religious values integral to their national identity. Therefore, the Soviet religious policy generated contradictions in the region.

In Central Asia and Uzbekistan, religious values were embedded not only in worship but also in customs, ceremonies, and family life. Despite harsh measures, religion could not be completely eradicated from society.

The Soviet state attempted to eliminate religious customs as "relics of the past," but the population's cultural memory allowed religious values to survive clandestinely. For example, Qur'an recitation, Ramadan and Eid celebrations, and circumcision ceremonies continued privately, albeit regularly.

Uzbekistan, as a religious center, held a unique position. Cities such as Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva had deeply rooted religious knowledge and heritage. Consequently, religious policy was implemented more strictly in this region.

For instance, ancient madrasas in Bukhara were closed and converted into administrative or economic facilities. Many famous mosques in Samarkand and Tashkent were used as warehouses, clubs, or residential buildings.

Simultaneously, the Soviet government used Uzbekistan as a "model region" in religious policy. SACMAK, established in Tashkent in 1943, also served to promote the USSR's propaganda internationally, presenting an image of religious freedom.

Religious preservation in private households was widespread. Families hid Qur'ans, taught children religious prayers, and conducted rituals informally. This indicates that the religious-cultural memory of the population was not entirely lost.

The Soviet state classified such secret religious practices as "illegal activities." Security services monitored religious activities, and in some cases, criminal liability was applied.

The case of Central Asia and Uzbekistan shows that Soviet religious policy could not completely eradicate religious life. Despite strict control and repression, religious values persisted secretly, laying the groundwork for the religious revival of the 1980s–1990s.

In conclusion, the 1930s–1950s in Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan, were marked by a contradictory Soviet religious policy. On one hand, the state took harsh measures to close religious institutions, restrict rituals, and persecute clergy. On the other hand, during the war, religious organizations were temporarily utilized for propaganda, and the establishment of SACMAK allowed limited official religious activity.

Throughout these processes, the population's religious values and centuries-old cultural heritage were not entirely lost. Instead, they persisted clandestinely, later providing a foundation for their restoration in social and cultural life.

In Uzbekistan, it is evident that the Soviet state sought to control religious life and maintain it within the framework of state ideology. However, due to the intrinsic connection between religious values and national identity, this policy was not fully effective. Consequently, with independence, religious freedom and the restoration of religious heritage developed rapidly.

Thus, one of the main lessons of the 1930s–1950s religious policy is that the religious and cultural values of a people cannot be eradicated by force. Even if maintained secretly, they persist in society and resurface when historical conditions change.

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