

## The Influence of the Soviet Regime on the Religious Beliefs of Ethnic Minorities

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### Abstract

*This article explores the development of religious relations in modern post-Soviet republics with reference to mobility and the imprint of the influence of the Soviet regime. Populations with different religious beliefs in Kazakhstan are reflective of the country's geographical position and the migrations and deportations during the Soviet regime. This article aims to identify and reveal the processes of transformation of religious thinking and beliefs of ethnic minorities in the USSR, as well as to uncover the notion of transformation of ethnic identity and self-consciousness. The leading approaches to the study of this topic are the descriptive method, the method of historiographical analysis and synthesis, as well as the problem-chronological approach. In addition, the article presents an analysis of various normative acts, examines the development of the Soviet regime's pressure on religious institutions and organisations of national minorities.*

**Keywords:** *Social control; ethnic identity; religions; migrations; religion in USSR; soviet internal politics*

### Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent republics, the issue of religious revival began to be raised throughout the post-Soviet space (McDougall, 2020). One of the main questions that arose at that time was the question of the evolution and transformation of religious relations on the territory of the Soviet Union, as well as the question of how the totalitarian machine of the Soviet regime, with the help of propaganda and manipulation, changed the worldview and religious beliefs of those nationalities who lived on the territory of the Soviet Union (McDougall, 2020). Attention should be paid to the religion of people who suffered from forced migration as they were ripped off not only from their religion but also from their usual cultural environment (Salguero Montaña and Hejazi, 2021). In the context of the so-called ideological monoculture, the Soviet leadership could not consider and recognise alternative and competing ideologies. Despite this, there were still two systems of ideological values in the Soviet Union: nationalism and religion (McDougall, 2020).

Christians, Muslims, as well as other confessions throughout the Soviet rule bore a great stigma of the class enemy (Foster et al., 2017). However, it is necessary to understand the essence of the religious policy of the Soviet state. The teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin

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were presented as new dogmas, which led to a not very rosy path of development for all denominations that fell under the yoke of Soviet power (Coşgel et al., 2020). The main purpose of studying this issue is to understand the processes and conditions created by the Soviet regime for each denomination, in which a special role is played by the gradual adaptation of religious figures to new realities and their use as another means of social control over the masses (Foster et al., 2017).

The influence of the Soviet regime on the change of national identity and the sense of ethnic identity was massive. Religion, which had previously fought against the manifestation of the state's intellectual monopoly, was now an ideological and class enemy of the state (Beattie, 2018; Kovalova and Sokolovska, 2021). A striking example of this is the Islamic world, which suffered irreversible losses during Soviet rule (Beattie, 2018). The idea of the Soviet regime was to destroy the barrier between many similar nationalities and ethnic groups and create a completely new, unified nationality – the Soviet citizen. Thus, the role of ethnic minorities as distinct peoples with their own will was reduced to zero (Northmore-Ball and Evans, 2016).

Using the example of separate Soviet republics, it is possible to trace in detail the influence of the Soviet regime, as well as the processes of the complex evolution of the religious beliefs of the peoples and ethnic groups that lived on its territory. The process of the gradual establishment of control over the church ministers, religious institutions and associations of the Soviet government, through which it subsequently controlled all remaining religious activities, brought with it not only distorted religious dogmas and doctrines but also the degradation of the entire church hierarchy. This has subsequently led to destructive metamorphoses in the church hierarchy, which church officials have been restoring for more than a decade in now independent post-Soviet countries (Mustafayeva, 2016).

The study analysed the influence of the Soviet regime on the religious beliefs of national minorities who, during the existence of the Soviet Union, lived on its territory, forming the so-called ethnic substrate and cultural diversity of this state, and which the Soviet Union, guided by pro-Marxist ideological considerations, decided to unify to create a common nationality called “citizen of the Soviet Union”. The influence of the Soviet regime on the religious beliefs of national minorities was shown by the study of religious relations on the territory of the USSR by the method of historical and socio-cultural analysis (Panasiuk, 2021). For a more thorough study, the methods of studying, analysing, synthesising and generalising historical and social literature were used. The presented study was carried out on the example of the Kazakh SSR

For a more objective consideration of the influence of the Soviet regime on the religious beliefs of national minorities, both narrowly subject research methods and methods aimed at analysing, synthesising or comparing a wide range of historical events were used. Using the *comparative-historical*, *concrete-historical* and *classification* methods, this article compares the events that took place in different republics during the repression of religious clergy and the desecralisation of religious customs of ethnic minorities.

### **Ideological Foundations of the New Religious Policy**

The ideological basis of the new Soviet state that emerged after the October Revolution implied the monocultural development of all spheres of life under a single party's control (D'encausse, 1973; Putinaitė, 2021). Such an ideological position caused problems in the



creation of such a state entity as the USSR, since, due to its ideological basis, the Soviet state could not recognise alternative and competing ideologies (Dunn, 1980). Despite this, the Soviet Union still had a system of ideological values and models of thinking that challenged the state's ideology (McDougall, 2020). Furthermore, the national identity of the various peoples of the Soviet state represented an additional threat to the state, especially if it was identified with religion. Religion refutes the absolute control of ideology by fighting the state's monopoly over intellectual power over citizens (McDougall, 2020).

Religious policy was replaced by militant atheism. The teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin became new dogmas (Coşgel et al., 2020; Engel-Di Mauro, 2020). One of the regime's main opponents was Islam and Sharia law (Webber et al., 2020). At the first stage, until the 1920s, the Muslim clergy still had a major influence on the faithful and exerted serious resistance to the Soviet power (Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quelquejay, 1979). At the second stage, in the late 1920s-1941s, the Soviet regime began to act more decisively, Sharia laws were abolished, the clergy lost their power and became more loyal to the Soviet regime. The third stage, which began after the Great Patriotic War, has the character of a mass departure of believers from religion. There is another periodisation of the struggle between Islam and the Soviet regime: before 1945 – an ideological attack on Islam; from 1945 to the mid-1980s – the suppression of the Muslim cult under the guise of atheistic propaganda; from the mid – 1980s to the collapse of the USSR – support and use of the Muslim religion, worshippers and Islamic associations to achieve their goals (Hager, 2019).

According to western sources, the Russian Orthodox Church did not fit well with any regime (Foster et al., 2017). A fairly popular point of view in the West was the opinion that the Soviet authorities considered religion a threat to Marxism (Cumbers, Gray, 2020). However, it is more likely that for Marxists, religion was primarily an instrument of social control and they still left a handful of controlled religious figures so that religion would not go underground (Foster et al., 2017; Gregor, 2019). The Soviet regime considered religion a bourgeois delusion, with the help of which, in pre-Soviet times, a handful of ruling people tried to keep the population under control. However, this statement did not prevent the Soviet authorities from considering that religion can be used (Foster et al., 2017).

The policy of separation of the church from the state, and schools from the church indicated the possibility of free activity of priests of any cults on the territory of the Soviet Republic, on the condition that they would not encroach on the possibility of governing the country (Andrews, 2016). The new Soviet state's behaviour indicates that the new state's policy's main goal was to undercut the church's positions (Coşgel et al., 2020). When the church is forcibly separated from the state with the premise that the state becomes anti-religious, it is no longer possible to talk about the neutrality of the Soviet state in the issue of religious relations (Coşgel et al., 2020).

### **The Policy of the Soviet Regime on the Religious Beliefs of National Minorities on the Example of the Kazakh SSR**

With the advent of Soviet power, the processes of eliminating Islamic foundations began. A large-scale campaign to reform the Turkic spelling began, with the transition of Arabic graphics to the Latin alphabet, which lasted from 1923 to 1929. The essence and role of this reform lay in one specific role – to destroy the influence of Islam in the region. However, religious rituals continued to be conducted in secret (Mustafayeva, 2016). Since 1917, the

decrees “On civil marriage, on children and on the maintenance of books of state acts” and “On the dissolution of marriage” were adopted. The main purpose of these decrees was the gradual narrowing of the function of Sharia in the republic. In 1924, polygamy, early marriage, marrying against a woman's will, etc. were prohibited (Mustafayeva, 2016). In 1918, the decree “On the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church” was adopted, which clarified the relationship between the state and religion. All the property of mosques were transferred to the state, and schools became secular and the teaching of religion in them was prohibited. The adopted decree of 1918 “On freedom of conscience” provided for a person's right to choose a religion, but in practice it was only formal (Mustafayeva, 2016).

From 1920 to 1940, any struggle against the Soviet system generally ended with the declaration of an individual as socially dangerous and being forced into a certain kind of labour or being deprived of their life (Mustafayeva, 2016). The realities of the war caused a revision of the existing relations between the state and religion in order to unite the people. The resolution of the CPC of December 19, 1944 No. 1944 “On the procedure for opening places of worship for religious cults” opened up opportunities for the revival of religious life. As a result, the number of registered mosques reached 25. The war contributed to granting some freedom of religion, at least during the rule of Stalin (Mustafayeva, 2016).

When the power was transferred to Khrushchev, religious persecution is revived and is considered the most deplorable time for Islam. One of the main goals of the Khrushchev era was the struggle against cosmopolitanism, which included “cosmopolitan” religions. Among the main objectives of this campaign was the liquidation of religious institutions. As early as 1960, 13 of the 26 holy places were closed. In addition, the publication of anti-religious literature increased (Mustafayeva, 2016).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, religion gradually retreats into private life, acquiring a closed, independent character, although religious rituals remain secret. In the 1970s a large proportion of the population were atheists and religion ceased to be the object of attention. At the same time, the struggle against Muslim traditions and customs was at its apogee. The payment of kalyam, early marriages, etc. were sharply criticised (Mustafayeva, 2016). During the last stage of Soviet rule from 1980 to 1991, Islam surprisingly came to the process of Islamic revival. The Law of 1991 “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations” returned the tradition of visiting holy places, which in turn gave an impetus to the Islamic revival throughout the republic (Mustafayeva, 2016). Thus, taking into account the Kazakh example, it can be seen that religion becomes more domestic, independent, while canonical Islam in the Soviet era recedes into the background (Mustafayeva, 2016).

### **The Soviet Regime and Religious Relations During the Years 1918-1940**

In August 1918, the People's Commissariat of Justice issued an instruction “On the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church”. The instruction covered churches, any other parts of religious societies created for the practice of any kind of worship, any societies that have limited the circle of their members exclusively to persons of the same religion (Coşgel et al., 2020). In November 20, 1917, there was an appeal of the Council of People's Commissars “To all working Muslims of Russia and the East”, in which all beliefs were declared free and inviolable. However, the proclaimed principles of mutual relations were largely declarative in nature and gradually transformed into their opposite with the Soviet authorities gaining more and more control in the regions. Already in the 1920s and 1930s, the



state determined its religious policy. Atheism was proclaimed the state ideology, and religious beliefs were considered as the bourgeois worldview of the class enemy (Hager, 2019).

The program of the RCP(b) adopted by the VII Congress in 1919 declared a structural provision on the separation of the church from the state, and the school from the church. Soon, the authorities announced the need to conduct broad scientific, educational and anti-religious propaganda (Coşgel et al., 2020). Using the example of the newspaper “Bezbozhnik” (“The Godless”), which began publication in the USSR in December 1922, the propaganda side of the struggle against religious dissent in the Soviet Union can be traced. On the basis of this newspaper, an organisation of militant atheists was created and on August 27, 1924, the first constituent meeting of the Society of Friends of the “Bezbozhnik” newspaper was held in Moscow. The society, supported by the government, grew stronger every year and by 1929 it was renamed the League of Militant Atheists (Coşgel et al., 2020). However, the population census in 1937 became a kind of starting point for religious sentiments that took place in the Soviet Union. Out of 30 million illiterate citizens of the USSR over the age of 16, 84% (or 25 million) declared themselves believers, and out of 68.5 million literate people – 45% (or more than 30 million). These figures clearly indicate the failures in the fight against religion (Coşgel et al., 2020).

After that, the importance of the role of the League of Militant Atheists began to decline, and functionally it was replaced by the NKVD bodies (Coşgel et al., 2020). In January 1920, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) adopted a resolution “On measures to strengthen anti-religious work”, in which religious organisations were declared a force opposing the Soviet government (Coşgel et al., 2020). In the first criminal codes of the USSR, there was no encroachment on religious figures for their activities. Criminal responsibility under some articles came only if a religious figure violated the rules of separation of church and state (Coşgel et al., 2020). In the future, the criminal legislation of the USSR, adopted in 1924, contributed to the continuation of reducing freedom of conscience to freedom of anti-religious propaganda. The rules provided for the possibility of applying exile and expulsion for persons not only convicted of committing crimes, but also for persons recognised by society as dangerous in a certain territory allowed to repress both participants of religious associations and persons who were previously members of these associations (Coşgel et al., 2020).

Since April 8, 1929, in accordance with the resolution of the VTsIK and the CPC of the RSFSR “On Religious Associations”, any mention of religious associations in most branches of Soviet law and legal literature was removed by the method of state control (Coşgel et al., 2020). As early as December 5, 1936, the adopted Constitution of the USSR further tightened the state’s policy towards religion and set an exact definition of the scope of freedom of conscience for religious institutions that were only allowed the freedom to “practice religious worship” (Zelkina, 2019). The full equality of all citizens, including “ministers of worship”, was proclaimed, but the freedom of anti-religious propaganda was consolidated (Coşgel et al., 2020).

## **New Religious Policy**

The Second World War contributed to the revival of religious life in the USSR, due to objective reasons, the latent religiosity of the population increased. To establish contacts between the state and religious associations in 1943, the Council for the Affairs of the Russian

Orthodox Church was created, and in 1944 – the Council for Affairs of Religious Cults (reformed into the Council for Religious Affairs) under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which were represented in the union and autonomous republics, territories and regions by their commissioners (Hager, 2019). Since 1944, the religious matters of the Muslims of the USSR have been managed by four independent centres: Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent), Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Transcaucasia (Baku), Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the North Caucasus (Buinaksk), Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the European part of the USSR and Siberia (Ufa) (Hager, 2019).

With the death of Stalin and with Khrushchev coming to power, religious politics shifted to a new opposite again. In 1954, the resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) were adopted “On major shortcomings in scientific and atheistic propaganda and measures to improve it” and “On errors in conducting scientific and atheistic work among the population”. A massive purge of church libraries took place in late 1958. Laws that strengthen the oppression of religious rights, such as “Instructions on the procedure for passing religious literature and objects of religious worship in the USSR” and “On measures to stop pilgrimages to so-called “holy places” (Hager, 2019), began to take effect.

With the advent of Khrushchev, the religious policy changed dramatically again and it should be viewed through the prism of his agricultural ambitions. For him, the issue of religion was a priority task, and he looked at the solution of this problem not from the point of view of repression but from the point of view of deliverance (Boiter, 1987). According to Khrushchev, the peasants should no longer need religious consolation and should be freed from the fetters of superstitions and clergymen who became a class enemy (Sapiets, 1976). The new ideal was to be a grain factory, and not a farm, and in this ideal mechanisation was considered as an “integral attribute of a socialist agricultural enterprise” and greatly contributed to the achievement of the Marxist desire to erase the border between agriculture and industry. Scattered villages were to be replaced by united agglomerates of urban-type residential buildings (Kluczevska and Hojjeva, 2022). For the Marxists, which Khrushchev was, the church was a means of public control (Foster et al., 2017). The Orthodox Church and Marxist ideology in the Soviet Union at that time had a mutually beneficial relationship. “The churchmen could use the Marxist blinders of the state to their advantage only as long as the state was Marxist” (Foster et al., 2017).

Already by the beginning of the 1960s, the Central Committee of the CPSU adopted a resolution “On the tasks of party propaganda in modern conditions”, in which it was noted that some party organisations passively relate to an ideologically hostile religion. In 1960 this was followed by the decree “On measures to eliminate violations by the clergy of the Soviet legislation on cults”, requiring changes in the foundations of the activities of religious denominations. By the end of 1960, the “Instruction on the Application of the Legislation on Religious Cults” followed, which prohibited religious centres from organising pilgrimages, educational centres and charity work (Hager, 2019; Kristinsson and Sigurdardottir, 2020).

With the advent of Brezhnev, relations between the authorities and religious denominations stabilised, and the struggle against religious movements was increasingly becoming formal and external. The training of Muslim clergy was allowed in a very limited amount (Hager, 2019). In 1968, the Tashkent meeting of the Commissioners of the Council for Religious Affairs was



held (Oppenheim, 1974; Stepanova, 2019). The commissioners in the regions and local authorities were instructed to scrutinise clerics, religious institutions, associations and be aware of all aspects of their activities (Hager, 2019).

During the Brezhnev era, religious-nationalist sentiments intensified in the southern republics of the USSR, which were promoted not only by internal circumstances, but also by the war in Afghanistan and the revolution in Iran, as a result of which the position of Islamic fundamentalism strengthened in the USSR (Suesse, 2019). In 1979, the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU “On further improvement of ideological, political and educational work” was adopted, which reminded of the need to develop and implement specific measures to strengthen atheist education. Later, in the resolutions from 1981 to 1983, the tasks of strengthening atheist education and measures to isolate the reactionary part of religious clergy were updated (Hager, 2019; Kharyshyn, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

Thus, the actions aimed at rejecting religion from the state and educating the population in the spirit of the Marxist ideology of atheism led to a decrease in the level of religiosity in the USSR. The study establishes the role of the Soviet regime in the spiritual life of ethnic minorities, and provides facts that prove the systematic and carefully planned policy of the Soviet state, which was aimed at spreading and introducing artificial influence on the religious beliefs of peoples and ethnic groups who lived on the territory of the USSR. Some people were deported to other republics, thus, forced migration became another way of impacting religion. The main role in the destruction of the spiritual cultures of ethnic minorities was played by the gradual destruction and deprivation of rights and freedoms from religious confessions that lived on the territory of the Soviet state.

In the course of the study, the processes of oppression of the Orthodox Church and Muslim religious institutions were examined in detail. The attempts of the Soviet government to destroy the influence of Islam in the South Kazakhstan region were considered. The process of gradual establishment of control over church ministers, religious institutions and associations by the Soviet authorities brought with it the degradation of the entire church hierarchy and changed religious dogmas and doctrines. Despite this, the gap between the new Soviet and traditional society was not a chasm, just like the gap between church principles and Soviet society. The proof of this is the preservation of the sacred basic elements in the religious cult, which the Soviet propaganda for its entire existence could not get rid of.

The analysis of the evolution of religious relations between the Soviet state and religion showed its gradual transformation during the entire existence of the Soviet regime. The analysis of the historical literature concerning the issue under study indicates that the study of the influence of the Soviet regime on the religious beliefs of national minorities in Kazakh historiography is not sufficiently complete and developed, so it is important to further study this issue for a thorough disclosure of this page in the history of modern times.

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