



# Religious Activities in the Soviet Republic of Central Asia as a Part of Domestic Policy in the USSR in the 20-40s of the 20th Century

G. H. Serikpa<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Voronezh State Agrarian University named after Emperor Peter 1, Voronezh, RUSSIA.

\*Corresponding Author (Email: [marisudjedje7@gmail.com](mailto:marisudjedje7@gmail.com)).

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## Abstract

The article examines the religious policy of the Soviet government in Central Asia from the 1920s to the 1940s. The atheistic nature of the religious policy is given, which consisted of the restrictions and repressions of the Soviet government against all believers of the Soviet Union, including the Muslims of Central Asia. It should also be noted that the religious activity of the Soviet authorities in Central Asia, as in the entire Soviet state, developed from cooperation with restrictions (1920-1929) to repressions (1929-1941) and from repressions and cooperation with restrictions (1941 –1949). However, the goal of eradicating religion in Soviet society was not achieved, despite the propaganda of atheism.

**Disciplinary:** Russian History, Religion & Believe, Public Administration, Public Policy & Management.

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## 1 Introduction

The relevance of the research topic is determined by the scientific, theoretical and practical significance of studying the religious policy of the Soviet government in the context of relations between the USSR and the Islamic world in the 1920s–1940s. The history of the Soviet state has shown that it sought to create a secular, educated society without religious prejudices. To achieve these basic goals, it became necessary to create a legal arsenal that promotes atheistic principles.

Therefore, from the first years of its existence, the Soviet government issued a decree regulating relations between church and state and defining the spheres of competence of each subject. This is the decree “On the separation of the church from the state and the school from the church” [3] of 4 February (23 January), 1918. The second most important legal action after the Decree of 23 January 1918 is the Decree of the Presidium (All-Russian Central Executive Committee and SNK) “On Religious Associations” of 8 April 1929. These two important legal acts allowed the government of the Soviet Union to put all religious organizations under its control. The implementation of these regulations had an impact on the Muslim peoples of Central Asia, whose identity was mixed with belonging to Islam. Thus, the resistance of the Muslim peoples of Central Asia and the determination of the Bolshevik authorities characterized the relationship between the two groups from 1920 to 1940.

## 2 Material and Methods

The nature of the Soviet religious policy in Central Asia is an integral part of the entire atheistic policy of the USSR, which corresponded to Marxist dogmas. Indeed, Marxism considered religion as a phenomenon that should be excluded from the process of building a socialist society. To better explain this position, it is important to reveal some elements of Karl Marx's view of religion. In his correspondence addressed to Arnold Ruge, Karl Marx emphasizes that religion is a theory of distortion of reality [8, p.5]. According to the philosopher, communism begins immediately with atheism, but the opposite is not always true [8, p.6]. In other words, a communist is necessarily an atheist, and an atheist is not necessarily a communist. Consequently, the victors of the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, being Marxists and Communists, are inevitably atheists.

In addition to atheistic Marxism, it is necessary to analyze Lenin's own point of view on religion. Indeed, in his letter to V.M. Molotov and all members of the Politburo on March 19, 1922, the leader of the Bolsheviks and the Soviet state accused religion of slavery. Lenin pointed out that religion keeps the working masses in slavery when they are already in slavery to the capitalists [10, p.57]. Religious captivity is considered more dangerous because it prevents workers from organizing an effective liberation struggle.

## 3 Theory

The Russian Empire after the conquest of Turkestan did not question the dominant position of Islam in the region. On the contrary, the colonial administration supported the Muslims of Central Asia. Indeed, according to Erkinov, who studied the text of N.P. Ostroumov [14], entitled “Essay on Khutba for the Russian Tsar”, indicated that there was a Khutba pronounced in favor of the Russian Emperor. This prayer was first said on July 29, 1888. It was recited in honor of the emperor for his gift for the repair of the Khoja Akhrar mosque in Tashkent. It was as a form of gratitude that the imams considered it important to say this prayer. However, after that, the governor-general of the region considered it necessary to make this prayer obligatory. By the way, the circular of the Governor-General B.A. Vrevsky, adopted in 1891, extended this obligation to all

mosques, mektebes and madrasahs of Turkestan [14, p.124-125]. Thus, the Russian administration, from the very beginning of its administration of Turkestan, did not seek to destabilize the Muslim religion for the sake of its own, which is nothing but Orthodoxy. In the second half of the 19th century, the empire in some way contributed to the creation of conditions for the flourishing of Islam in the Turkestan region. [6, p. 95].

## 4 Results

Having come to power, V.I. Lenin and I.V. Stalin signed a declaration, which was published on 20 November 1917 under the title "To all the working Muslims of Russia and the East." The content of this declaration was stated by V.I. Lenin's assurance to Muslim peoples regarding the guarantee of their individual and collective freedoms in all areas of their lives. This promise was partially fulfilled by the Bolsheviks in the first years after the declaration, however, in fact, this promise did not correspond to the political vision of the Bolsheviks. In fact, the Soviet government agreed to cooperate with Islam and abandoned actions that could destabilize society in Central Asia. On the initiative of V.I. Lenin in October 1918, the Central Bureau of Muslim Organizations was created. It was entrusted with the task of carrying out organizational, political, propaganda and agitation work among Muslim communists. In fact, it was an organ of control over the activities of Muslim organizations in the RSFSR. At the same time, a network of Muslim bureaus (musburo) was created in Muslim regions, including Central Asia (Turkestan). The network of Muslim bureaus, formed by the county and regional bureaus of Turkestan, was under the general leadership of the Regional Musburo under the Regional Committee of the CPT. According to Yu.A. Lysenko and I.B. Bochkareva, the territorial organization of Central Asia and the gradual inclusion of the indigenous population in the state and party bodies of the Bolsheviks were initiated by the Musbureau of Turkestan, headed by Turar Ryskulov [1, p.4-5].

This policy, aimed at ensuring freedom of religion for the peoples of Central Asia, was part of the Leninist national policy. However, the implementation of the Leninist policy in the region was entrusted to the Turkburo, the decision to establish which was made in 1920, after the IX Congress of the RCP (b). The Turkburo was transformed into the Central Asian Bureau (Sredazbyuro) after the entry of the communist parties of Bukhara and Khorezm into the RCP (b). The main mission of the Sredazbyuro is the implementation of the Leninist national policy of the party, which officially proclaimed the idea of equality and freedom for all peoples of the USSR [12, p.108]. But before the creation of this body on the basis of a decree of 23 January (5 February), 1918, religious education in Turkestan, as in the entire RSFSR, was prohibited. Thanks to the protest of the Muslims of the Turkestan region, the Soviet government stopped using it and chose the path of cooperation. Thus, on 9 November 1918, the Bolshevik authorities decided to allow religious education in Central Asia. In addition, on 20 March 1919, the Soviet authorities decided to cancel the decision to close the traditional mektebe.

The current duality in the religious policy of the Soviet government was more in its actions in the field of education. Despite the policy of cooperation adopted by the Soviet government in

1920, the decree on the separation of church from state and school from church applied to the Islamic religion. Group education of Muslim children under the age of 18 was prohibited. Thus, representatives of Muslim organizations appealed to the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee. 14 December 1922 In this correspondence of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, they ask to allow group education of children under 18 [4, p.164-165]. On 15 December 1922, the V department of the People's Commissariat of Justice gave a negative answer to this request, since the decision of the Council of People's Commissars on the separation of religion from the state remained in force. In addition, the People's Commissariat of Justice argued that it is unacceptable to teach religion within the walls of general education schools and collective classes, even at home and in mosques [4, p. 165].

However, the government in its struggle against religion in Turkestan in 1923 adopted a sparing method. The soft method used by the government to peacefully get rid of the Islamic religion in Turkestan was the Main Vakf Administration, established in 1923 [9, P.164]. This body worked on the elimination of the Islamic religion and the Sovietization of Turkestan: under his leadership, mektebe and madrasah were reorganized into Soviet schools. In 1924, in three districts of Soviet Turkestan (Syrdarya region, Samarkand region, Fergana region), 50 mektebes and madrasahs were reorganized, which accepted 2548 students in the same year [9, P.168]. In addition, the HLG also financed and trained Muslim teachers (madurris) who agreed to switch to Soviet education [9, P.167].

However, the Muslim population of Soviet Turkestan and the entire USSR still did not accept the restrictions and changes introduced by the Bolsheviks in their way of life, demanding the removal of some restrictions. Despite repeated requests from representatives of Muslim organizations in Russia, the Soviet government remained adamant on the issue of separating the church from the state and the church from the school. In October 1923, the Soviet government published a circular "On the Teaching of the Islamic Faith." In this circular, the authorities considered unacceptable repressions against mullahs who teach and preach Islam and the principles of the Muslim faith in mosques, at home, and also in private, at the initiative of citizens. It has been said that these places cannot be considered schools of theology. Therefore, the mullahs do not violate the aforementioned decree. On the other hand, the authorities insisted that the teaching of religious dogmas was prohibited in Soviet schools and in private schools where general subjects were taught [5, p.626-627].

In their statement of 28 July 1924, "On the Teaching of the Muslim Faith among Eastern Peoples Professing the Muslim Faith," the People's Commissariat of Education and the NKVD further clarified the meaning of the decree on the separation of the church state from the church school. The first paragraph of the instruction indicated that the teaching of Islamic norms in the Soviet school is unacceptable [5, p.593]. However, the indignation of the Muslim population of the RSFSR forced the Soviet government to issue a decree of December 23, 1924 on the permission to

teach the Muslim faith. But it was allowed to be held only in mosques and on days when there were no classes in Soviet schools.

Thus, this last concession of power made it possible to open places for the teaching of Islam in Turkestan. In the same year, there were 19 Muslim schools in the Kazakh ASSR with 280 students. In 1925–1926, the confrontation between the Soviet government and the Islamic world of the USSR was minimal. However, in 1926–1940, the Soviet government organized the most severe repressions against the Muslims of Central Asia, in which there were no indulgences for religious activities. Since 1926, in the Kazakh ASSR, official documents of the Soviet government contained information about the anti-Soviet nature of the Muslim religion, which forced representatives of the Central Spiritual Council of Muslims to prepare for resistance. Therefore, on 27 April 1927, the Central Spiritual Council of Muslims appealed to all muhtasibs, imams and all Muslims. The Central Spiritual Muslim Board clarified that it was in favor of teaching Muslim children in secular schools and pointed out that the teaching of religion was reduced to teaching the basics of Islam in accordance with the laws on separation from the Church and the state [13, p. 121].



**Figure 1:** Muslims in the Soviet republics of Central Asia

Despite the rejection of the accusations and the clarifications of the central Muslim spiritual council, the Soviet authorities took action against Islam and all religion. So in the course of the struggle, the Soviet government decided to replace the Arabic alphabet with the Latin one in 1928–1929. O.D. Talskaya saw in these changes the desire of the Soviet authorities to eradicate Islamic education in the region [12, p.111]. On 28 May 1928, the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR issued a decree on a complete ban on the teaching of the Muslim faith, and the publication of the journal Islam Majallasy was discontinued in 1928 [13, p.123]. This year, all Muslim religious primary and secondary schools were closed in the USSR, including in Central Asia. In the Kazakh ASSR, 198 were closed in the period 1928–1932. On 8 April 1929, the Soviet

government (VTsIK and SNK) issued a resolution "On Religious Associations" to regulate religious life in the USSR. On the basis of this normative act, religious associations were recognized as religious societies or religious groups throughout the USSR [7, p.29-45]. Thus, religious life in the USSR, and in Central Asia, was sharply limited.

After the death of Mufti R. Fakhretdinov in 1936, the Soviet government refused to hold a congress to select a replacement for the head of the TsDMU. Kashaf (Kashaffutdin) Tardzhimanov, his deputy, who applied for this post, was arrested by the authorities in May of the same year and taken to a prison in Ufa. According to Yu.N. Gusev, the further fate of Kashaf (Kashaffutdin) Tardzhimanov is unknown. Presumably, he died in custody in the early 1940s. Magdi (Magadi) Magkulovich Magkulov (1874–1937), Judge of the TsDMU, was arrested on 28 February 1937 and shot on 22 December 1937 [2, p.86-87]. Repressions against Islamic leaders and Muslims of Central Asia continued until 1941. The suspension of repressions from 1941 was caused, according to a number of researchers, by the fear of the Soviet government supporting the Muslim population in the VOV German troops. However, Muslims sent into exile, such as Ali Kayaev, died during the war [11, p.45]. Thus, V.O.V. contributed to the softening of the religious policy of the Soviet authorities. Since then, the loyal Islamic clergy of the USSR and Central Asia have not been persecuted anymore. At the same time, there was only one madrasah in Bukhara, and one Islamic institute in Tashkent.

After the war, contradictions arose between the Soviet government and the Muslim clergy. Thus, Rasuli Gabdrakhman, mufti of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims since 1936, tried to organize training courses for imams in the period from 1945 to 1946, but met with a categorical refusal from the Soviet authorities. However, Mufti Rasuli Gabdrakhman was later given the opportunity to organize the second congress of the Central Spiritual Muslim Board in 1948 after the congress of 1926. It was at the second congress that the Central Spiritual Muslim Board was transformed into the Spiritual Administration of the Muslim European Part of the USSR (DUMES) [13, p.136].

## 5 Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, two possible remarks can be made characterizing the religious policy of the Soviet government in Central Asia. The first remark concerns the nature of the Soviet religious policy applied in Central Asia: the religious policy of the Soviet authorities in Central Asia was an integral part of the general policy of building a socialist Soviet society freed from religious dogmas. And religion, considered by the Bolsheviks as one of the factors of alienation of the working masses, "the opium of the people" according to Lenin, must disappear from among the Soviet people. With the establishment of Soviet power, a decree was issued on January 23, 1918 on carrying out a struggle against religion in the RSFSR by separating the church from the state and the school from the church. This decree became the main normative act for all religious denominations, including Islam. The second most important normative act after the decree of 23 January 1918 was issued on 8 April 1929. It was through this that religious organizations and their

activities in the USSR came under the control of the Soviet government. The second observation concerned the methods used by the Soviet government to combat Islam in tiddle Asia. At first (1920-1926), the Soviet government avoided direct confrontation with the Muslim population, including in Central Asia. Thus, this period was a combination of cooperation in the presence of restrictions. In the second stage (1926-1941), relations between the authorities and Soviet Muslims moved from restrictions to repressions against the clergy and Muslims of the USSR, including Central Asia. Repression peaked in 1937 and subsided until it gave way to limited cooperation during and after World War II (1941–1945).

## 6 Availability of Data and Material

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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**SERIKPA G. H.** is a Postgraduate student at Voronezh State Agrarian University named after Emperor Peter 1, Voronezh, Russia.

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