
STATE-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD

A PERIODIZATION AND CONTENT

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Abstract

This article considers the periodization variants of religious politics in the Soviet history. The authors disagree with the opinion of the Soviet and modern Russian researchers. Moreover, they offer own version of the periodization of religious policy in general in the USSR and particularly in Kazakhstan. The authors assume that distinctions in the stages and their chronology are not identical for different national republics of the Soviet area. They focus on the legal basis of the religious policy of the Soviet state, methods and forms of antireligious countermeasures and consider in detail the religious situation and the role of Islam in daily occurrence of the Soviet Kazakhstan citizens during the second half of the XX century. In conclusion, despite the activation of the fight against religion during the certain periods of the Soviet history, the proportion of believers and sympathizers of religion was very considerable in various regions in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Soviet, history, religious, politics, Islam

1. Introduction

The relations of the state and religion had dichotomizing character throughout the existence of the USSR. Also, the party policy towards religion and activities of religious organizations was ambiguous. Communists held the belief that “the intoxicating effect of religion distracts workers from current affairs” [1]. This became the guide for the soviet leaders in relation to the believers and the religious organizations. However, sometimes, the religion-

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related politics changed in the polar way depending on the political situation.

The Soviet and modern researchers have created works related to the problem of periodization of religious politics and the relations between the church and the state. According to them, there were no fundamental differences until 1950's: the periods of 1917–1920 and 1920–1930 were designated as the period of fight against clergy and repressions; 1941–1945 is the period of politics mitigation towards Church. Basic distinctions can be obtained only in evaluation the 50–80s of the 20th century. The Soviet historians call the period between 1940–1980 'the loyalty period'. While, the authors of the Post-Soviet period write that there was 'a new advent' to Church from the middle of 1950's until 1980's.

We do not completely agree with the Soviet and modern Russian researchers. The stages about the relationship between Soviet state, religion and religious institutions need to be corrected (the differences in the stages and their chronology are distinctive, as an example, for different national republics of the Soviet space, which depend on the faiths dominated among the population). From our point of view, it is important to consider these problems and their analysis. Since the recent past people have reiterated the majority of historical analogies and forecasts. That is the reason why in order to avoid serious mistakes it is vital to keep this knowledge [2].

In this article, we offer a specified variant of periodization of religious politics in the USSR.

2. Method

The analysis of the problem introduced in the research, certainly, has a multidisciplinary character. The periodization variants of the state-religious relations of the Soviet history can be used when writing fundamental, complex and special works on history of Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Russia, etc.

The article materials concerning the legislative base of religious policy of the Soviet state can be applied in making historical, theological, social researches on theoretical-methodological problems of history of the countries in the post-Soviet period.

3. Discussion

In the process of allocation of the stages, we took into account general trajectory, vector of religious policy and, firstly, we considered the relationship of the power with Christianity and Islam. We offer the following variant of periodization for religious politics in the USSR and Kazakhstan, in particular.

The first stage is the period from 1917 to 1923. Firstly, this is a stage of Bolshevik active expression of Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches). At that time the militant atheism took initial steps on religious politics. In 1917 'Declaration of the rights of the peoples of Russia' proclaimed "cancellation of all national and national – religious privileges and restrictions".

This stage appears as tough process of persecutions and repressions against Orthodox Christians, Catholics and other religious people and churchmen. The well-known Marxian definition of religion as ‘opium of the masses’ became the core of the Soviet state politics. At this stage from 1918 to 1920 the campaign for prosecution of Orthodox religion developed. Mass expropriation of values, robberies of churches and execution of churchmen began after the extraction of Russian Orthodox Church Saints relics (in particular, there were 65 shrines with the relics of Russian saints opened, accompanied by photo and video footage, which was actively copied for agitation purposes). According to some information only during the period from 1917 to 1921, the total number of the victims among Christian clergy and religious people rose to amount to more than 25 thousand people [3].

The second stage is the period from 1923 to 1929. This is a stage of relative ‘religious freedom’. The anti-religious policy during the first years of the Soviet power did not succeed. Thus, partial religious revival began. In 1923, J.V. Stalin published the circular letter to all provincial committees with the requirement to forbid closing of churches and arrests of religious people. As a result, during the period of 1923–1929 the religious politics of the state underwent some mitigation. Some researchers call this period ‘the religious New Economic Policy’ by drawing parallels with the stages of the Soviet history [4].

In their researches authors call the period from 1918 to 1928 as ‘Muslim national communism’ in the USSR. These ten years were not characterized by very harsh repressive measures in relation to Islam (but in our opinion, this circumstance also relates to other non-Christian religions). Therefore, the period from 1918 to 1928 in general remained to be the stage of relative ‘religious freedom’. As the French researchers note [5], we also consider it necessary to find the reasons for the loyal relation of the reign to Islam and Muslims. The territorial autonomies in national regions of the country were proclaimed one after another during 1917–1918 in the Soviet Russia (The Turkestan autonomy, ‘Alash’ autonomy, etc.). Bolsheviks systematically destroyed them one by one during the civil war (1918–1920). In concurrence with this, they tried to attract national elite of these autonomies to cooperation because without their support it seemed impossible to find supporters in national suburbs. In such conditions, the reign did not aggravate the religious question in these regions. Therefore, there were no robust anti-Islamic actions, and as a result only rare ‘cavalry charges’ on Islam took place. Respectively, the leaders of national and religious elite did not exacerbate the relation with Moscow until the middle of the 1920.

Thus, we define two stages (in the history of Russia), which are opposite in terms of the state’s relation to Christianity – 1917–1923 and 1923–1929 (or the Russian territories), and one stage (for Kazakhstan) regarding Moscow’s relation to Islam – 1917–1929. The first measures aimed to destruct the foundations of Islam in the communist country took place nearly 10 years after the measures against Christianity and other confessions.

The third stage is the period from 1929 to 1941. This is a stage of stringency towards anti-religious fight when the partially liberating ‘religious New Economic Policy’ was overthrown. Propaganda and promotion gradually began to pale into insignificance in fight against the religion. Hereby the period from 1932 to 1937 received the name of ‘a godless five years’ in the history of Church.

We know that the mass destruction of religious buildings was not that easy until 1930, because it required a permission from the Commission on Affairs of Cults at Presidium of The All-Russian Central Executive Committee. However, from 1929 to the beginning of 1930 considerable number of regulations was enforced. Those regulations seriously restricted the rights of the religious organizations and allowed the local authorities to close churches. Later on, the campaign operated on the closing and demolition of religious buildings became large-scale.

At this stage, an active prosecution of Islam began in the USSR. By 1928, all Muslim religious elementary and middle educational institutions were closed. While 1912 in Russia there were more than 26000 mosques with about 45000 cult attendants, on the other hand, as of the beginning of 1941 there were only about 1000 [5, p. 272]. In Kazakhstan during 1928–1933, 198 churches and mosques were closed.

In 1932, the first repressions against Muslim representatives and believers began. However, despite the pressure, repressions and destruction of a considerable part of clergy, vigorous atheistic propaganda activity, including ‘The League of militant atheists’ (1925–1947), the religion continued to play an essential role in spiritual life of society. Orthodoxy kept its position in Russian villages, especially among middle age and senior generation. In addition, among urban population the religion was not exterminated thereto. Only the young komsomol members perceived the propaganda as a reality. H. Marcuse gives the characterization of ‘the developed industrial society’ person in the work ‘One-dimensional man’ [6]. However, many of his characteristics are typical for ‘homo sovieticus’. The Soviet promotion manipulated the consciousness of youth. Because of such ‘social training’, the young generation [7, 8] became atheists, but this atheism was frivolous too, because, “the right for the final answer to the question which requirements are true and which of them are false” [6, p. 13–14] belongs to individuals. However, this is only possible if individuals are free, so they are able to give own answer. Their answer cannot be considered as their own if they are deprived of autonomy and as long as their consciousness is a subject of manipulation [6, p. 9].

The Muslim population “showed uninterested and even hostile relation regarding the state’s attempts to take measures against Islam” [9]. The following stage confirms stable position of religious spirituality in the Soviet society.

The fourth stage is the period from 1941 to 1953. This is a stage of a partial revival of religious life in the country and weakening of totalitarian power in terms of religion. Consolidation of society during the war period and usage of all reserves for its mobilization are the causes for reconsideration of the

state-religious politics. The accurate vertical of power for religious life of the country was established during this period. In 1943, The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was created, and in general, there were four independent centres controlling the spiritual affairs of Muslims in the USSR. In September 1943, the Council for affairs of Russian Orthodox Church was created under the Council of People's Commissars. In May 1944 the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was formed.

The characteristic of the religious situation in the early fifties can be gathered from the report of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults across Kazakhstan about the situation of religious cults for March 25, 1951: "The main religious cult in Kazakhstan is the cult of Muslims. Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Dungs, Uzbeks, Tatars and some other nationalities who moved from the Caucasus in the years of war (karachi, balkara, etc.) confess this cult". [Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (APRK), Fund 708, Inventory 15, Case 296, Sheet 57].

Islam and Orthodoxy were the leading religions in Kazakhstan. The relation of the power towards these religions was more loyal, than to the other religious communities. Though, in the territory of Kazakhstan the Office of the Commissioner for religious and the other supervisory authorities closely monitored the representatives of these leading faiths too.

The Commissioner for affairs of Russian Orthodox Church of the Council at Council of Ministers of Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1946 announces that, according to incomplete data, commission of religious Orthodox practices was carried out considerably widely. For December 1, 1953, the total amount of the operating churches and houses of worship of Russian Orthodox Church in the republic was 54, from them 27 in the cities, 8 in industrial settlements and in the rural zone – 19. In total, 91 people were registered as clergy in the republic [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 26, Case 344, Sheet 27]. In 1946 there were 10547 cathedrals, churches and meetinghouses on the territory of the USSR [10], including 22 Orthodox churches in Kazakhstan.

Orthodoxy took an important place in Slavonic people's life. However, in the mentioned report, this religion is not noted as the most significant cult in Kazakhstan: "The cult of evangelistic Christians and Baptists occupies the second place after the cult of Muslims and they are followed by Old Believers, Lutherans, representatives of Judaic religion (Jews), Seventh-day Adventist, etc." [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 15, Case 296, Sheet 57].

There are small amount of information about the situation of these cults: "The followers of Judaism live in all cities of Kazakhstan. Today they have only one registered community in Kzyl-Orda. Except this registered community, in some cities there were unregistered groups. These groups were rejected to get registration and were fell apart. Old Believers were showing by small groups in some cities and areas in Kazakhstan. They have no registered communities, they do not submit the petitions for opening of houses of worship, but they make pressing religious practices (washing and a funeral service of dead men).

Lutherans consist of the local Germans and the Germans who moved in the years of war from the Volga region and other areas of the Union. Generally, they live in the rural zones. They also have no registered communities; they do not submit any petitions for opening of worship houses. However, they commit pressing religious practices and celebrate big religious holidays (Easter, Christmas, etc.). In Kazakhstan, the number of Seventh-day Adventists is small. They do not openly show their religious activities. Except representatives of the listed cults in Kazakhstan, there are still followers of the Buddhism – they are Koreans, Kalmyks who moved from the Far East and the Volga steppes in the 1930th and in the years of war ...” [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 15, Case 296, Sheet 59] Thus, the information about the unregistered communities across Kazakhstan is very limited.

The representative of the Council for affairs of Russian Orthodox Church under the Secretary Soviet of Kazakhstan Socialist Republic reports that according to incomplete data the commission of religious Orthodox practices was widely implemented in 1946. So, the baptism was made not only for babies, but also for grown children aged from five up to 15 years. The cases when people of other religions accepted Orthodoxy took place as well. Visiting churches and houses of worship by believers constantly increased especially in the days of church holidays [11].

In general, unregistered Muslim communities and prayer houses constructions existed across Kazakhstan. Believers were engaged in construction of mosques without any permission, organized mass church services. The most famous among the Muslims were so-called ‘vagrant’ mullahs. Appearance of ‘vagrant’ mullahs was connected with the fact that the Soviet authorities did not give them registration as well as to believers of other faiths. Their activity was connected with the conduction of ceremonies at funerals, weddings, readings of Mohammedan prayers in religious days (‘Oraza-Bayram’, ‘Eid al-Adha’). The number of people who took part in religious holidays was from 20–30 to 400–500 in villages. In the cities, the number of people was much bigger. For instance, in 1951–1953 mosque attendance in days of Muslim holidays was from 4000 to 5500 people in Almaty. There are data in archives regarding the amount of sacrificial cattle in the day of Kurban-ayt: in 1951– 1155 rams, in 1952 – 1912. It should be noted that this data covers only 68 provinces in Kazakhstan and about 3–4 populated localities from each province [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 26, Case 344, Sheet 16–75].

As noted in publications, during war and post-war Stalin period until 1954, relative weakening of tension was observed between the power and Islam in the country. Creation of several Spiritual Administrations of the Muslims (in Ufa, Baku, Buynaksk and Tashkent) helped the Islamic institutes to withstand. The separate spiritual administration was not established in Kazakhstan. However, Islam position became stronger in the republic. From our point of view, this thesis is confirmed by the facts from everyday life of believers from Central Kazakhstan. For example, the archives monitor departure of cults in Stalin district of Karaganda city and most of them were carried out by mullahs at

home. 163 cases of ritual of 'zhanaza' (the dead man's burial service) were recorded in 1948, by 1953 – 363 cases which is 2.2 times more; 'isym' (appellation) - 33 and 69 respectively; 'neke' (wedding) had an increase from 6 to 14 cases (2.3 times more) [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 26, Case 344, Sheet 16–75]. Over 15 boys did 'sundet' (circumcision ceremony) in one day in Stalin kolkhoz of Kokshetau district in North Kazakhstan area. At the same time for the organization of this ceremony, 15 rams were slaughtered. About 500 people did 30-day fasting (oraza) annually in one of districts of Jambyl region and went to worship to the grave of 'Saint Karahan' [APRK, Fund 708, Inventory 5/1, Case 617, Sheet 21–23]. These are only several recorded facts, while there were much more in everyday life.

From the beginning of war, 'warming' of state relations towards the religious organizations did not mean that it refused its strategic goal to destruct the religion. However, the party just ceased 'to stick out' this problem for some time due to the need of consolidation of society. Anti-religious promotion was transferred into the promulgation area and wider promotion of materialistic views, natural science and scientific and technical knowledge. This was declared in the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1944 'On the organization of scientific and enlightened promotion' [12]. Thus, the party succeeded while keeping the balance between political (use of Church) and ideological (need of replacement of religious representations) interests.

The creation of 'Znaniye' society allowed beginning the consolidation of the anti-religious front, which happened in 1947, but it has been gathering pace for some time. From November 1948 to March 1953, all churches were closed in the USSR [13].

The Moscow Patriarchy, as other religious institutes, was evaluated as the tool of the foreign public policy by the governance of the USSR. This was more or less important during the different periods. The Church channels were also used for achievements of the foreign policy purposes by the Soviet Union [14].

The fifth stage is the period from 1954 to 1964. This is a stage of toughening of anti-religious policy after the 20th congress and propagation of 'scientific atheism'. In 1941–1953 De-Stalinization in 'warming' of religious policy developed into a powerful antireligious campaign in Khrushchev's time.

After death of J.V. Stalin, some corrections were introduced into the religious policy and legislative work of the state-party bodies on the religion. In 1954, two resolutions were accepted with an interval of four months (from July to November). The acceptance of these resolutions is the evidence of a dichotomy in religious policy. On the one hand, the resolution 'On Large disadvantages of Scientific and Atheistic Promotion and Measures of its Improvement' noted the activation of 'Church and various religious sects', growth of population which performed religious rites and demanded from the party, the Komsomol organizations and other institutes to carry out anti-religious work "systematically and harder than ever, using the methods of persuasion, patient explanation and individual approach to the religious people". On the

other hand, the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU 'On the mistakes in carrying out scientific and atheistic promotion among the population', convicted methods of slander, abuse, administrative intervention in the activity of the religious organizations and also demanded "the expansion of systematic tedious work on promotion of natural-scientific knowledge and ideological fight against religion". Researchers note that the latter document sharply and openly condemned 'power methods' towards religion for the first time since 1920 [15].

Nevertheless, in less than two years, the anti-religious policy became proponent. Although, the period of governance of N.S. Khrushchev is called 'the thaw', there was considerable cooling of relations between the state and the religious organizations. After a number of resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU and Council of Ministers of the USSR ('On the memorandum of promotion and propaganda department of the Central Committee of the CPSU of federal republics 'On disadvantages of scientific and atheistic promotion'; 'On monasteries in the USSR', 'On increased taxation for the income of the diocesan enterprises and monasteries', 1958) active fight with "religious leftovers and toughening of living conditions of religious communities began" that testified to a new stage of offenses against Church.

It is necessary to agree with the famous Russian researcher M.I. Odintsov who is an expert in religion and religious situation in the USSR. Odintsov considers what 'Khrushchev's thaw' had negative effect on the state and church relations in the 1930's [16]. Under the new conditions, the task assigned to Councils was to reduce the number of the religious organizations as much as possible. As a result, while at the beginning of 1954, in the USSR there were 18474 operating religious societies (including, Orthodox Christians – 13423), in 1965, the number of religious societies comprised 11702 (including, Orthodox Christians – 7551) [16]. Thus, in 10 years the reduction was by more than one third (36%).

The religious policy of the Soviet State under the governance of N.S. Khrushchev is characterized as persecutions on Islamic belief and believers. Some case studies confirm this: the number of people interested to make the pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca sharply decreased. 53, 52 and 17 applications in 1958, 1959 and 1960 were submitted for the pilgrimage to Mecca respectively. From these people in 1958 the pilgrimage was made by one person; in 1959 the number was the same. However, in 1960 nobody made the pilgrimage [17]. Therefore, the number of people interested to make hajj had reduced by three times by 1960. Moreover, there was nobody who made the pilgrimage. Let us compare the situation with pre-revolutionary. 500 Kazakhs from Omsk city got permission to make a hajj in 1905 [18].

The strengthening of measures appeared in the confidential resolution of March 16, 1961, 'On the strengthening of control over the implementation of the legislation on cults' which demanded immediate restoration of legislation in 1929. It obliged the local Soviet structures to establish strict control over its fulfilment and to take timely measures to prevent violations related to this

legislation by clergy and religious associations. All of the resolutions of the 1940 have become invalid [State archive of the Russian Federation (SA RF), F. 6991, I. 2. C. 302, Sh. 2–2 turnover].

Based on the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU of 1958 ‘On the measures to stop making the pilgrimage to so-called ‘holy places’ 13 out of 26 holy places were closed in the Kazakh SSR. The sacred spring Ayak-Kalkan (Almaty Region) became the resort, Ukach-At’s mausoleum became the camp for pioneers, Uzun-Ata is a veterinary station now [19]. In 1959 the number of Muslim ‘sacred’ places that are registered in the USSR was 839, and by 1974 their number was reduced to 612 [20, 21].

From the first years of existence of the Soviet power, the propaganda machine actively introduced ‘the sacrifice syndrome’ in mass consciousness [22]. The people made sacrifices for the victory of communism as they dedicated to it work, years of their life and material values. They adapted and survived under the conditions of totalitarian system and kept their spirituality, including, religious. Despite long atheistic pressure and repressive measures, Muslims of Kazakhstan especially in the rural zone continued conducting Muslim ceremonies and celebrating religious holidays.

The sixth stage is the period from 1964 to 1990. This is activation stage of ‘scientific atheism’ in the State and religious policy of the party. In the era of L.I. Brezhnev, the relation of the state and the religious organizations had civilized form. The rhythm of massive offenses against religion slowed down. The anti-religious promotion continued in the other form aimed to be of ‘scientific character’. Anti-religious activity, including promotion represented the whole system from research institutes of scientific atheism of social sciences Academy of the CPSU Central Committee to pioneer propaganda groups. The only thing that changed was the form: from openly repressive to ‘scientific and atheistic’. All mass media were used for the anti-religious promotion: shows on radio, movies, constant or traveling exhibitions, newspapers articles, special periodical publications and public lectures.

Anti-Islamic promotion continues and even amplifies after 1980s. Islam loses the position a little and one of the considerable problems that aggravated this tendency was extremely low educational level of Muslim clergy. In the 1960–1980, the number of mosques fluctuated from 22 to 28 in Kazakhstan. It is known from the sources that the politics of the Soviet power did not lead to full replacement of religion from social and public life of Kazakhstan citizens. Therefore, the results of the researches conducted in Kazakhstan in the late eighties showed a rather high level of religiousness [23]. The share of the people who called themselves ‘believers’ and ‘sympathizers’ of religion varied from 20% to 70% in various regions of the republic [24].

In 1981, the Central Committee of the CPSU prepared the next anti-religious resolution ‘On Strengthening of Atheistic Education’. In 1983, the resolution ‘About Measures for Ideological Isolation of a Reactionary Part of Muslim Clergy’ was accepted. In the transformation years, there was a transition from anti-religious policy of the state to cooperation with the religious

organizations. The last atheistic resolution 'On strengthening of fight against Islam' was accepted in August 1986. However, only in the late eighties it became possible to speak about the termination of atheistic persecutions in the USSR. Since 1987, there had been the most considerable changes of the USSR politics in relation to confessions. For the first time religious anniversaries in the USSR were officially celebrated: 1000th anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus', 200th anniversary of Muslim religious authorities of the European part of Russia and Siberia, and 1100th anniversary of the adoption of Islam by the population of the Volga region and Cisural area. In 1990 was enacted the legislation of USSR 'About liberty of conscience and the religious organizations'. This legislation considerably changed the nature of the relationship of the state and the religious organizations.

4. Conclusions

In the governmental model of religious policy during the various periods of the Soviet history, there were both the stages of the government's loyal relation towards religion and religious life of believers, and tough total extermination of priests, faiths and spiritual life of the Soviet people.

Analysing the Soviet model of the governmental religious policy, it is possible to draw a conclusion that in the last decades there was no concept and no political line in its realization. The reforms that provide religious freedom were replaced by stages of repressions or by primary orientation to ensuring the rights for atheism as ideology and reduction in mandate and the influence of religion and the religious organizations in society.

Referring to the stages of religious policy of the government, the authors of this article aimed to find out: why in spite of the fact that Islam and closely related pre-Islamic cults were pushed off into the family size, this religion had occurred in considerable part of the Kazakh society's life? Why the methods of religious policy that are different in the contents and orientation, were rejected by most of the believers and society in general and worked only during the 1970–1980s? The reasons of the rejection are designated by researchers (M.I. Odintsov [16], etc.) and lie in the policy of the state: underestimation of a 'religious factor' in pre-crisis and crisis phases of political development of the country; continuous delay in correction of a course of the governmental church policy; pushing off a 'religious question' on the periphery of the government's interests; politicization and ideologisation of religious policy. In our opinion, it is necessary to add the reasons of the decrease in the religiousness of Kazakhstan (and Soviet in general) society from 1970s and until the first half of the 1980s: the first reason is a natural decline of the senior age representatives. The majority of this group were believers. The second reason is a result of systemic and effective mechanism of agitation and propaganda of Soviet system.

During the analysis of the Soviet model of the public religious policy during the various periods of the Soviet history it should be noted that, on the one hand, there were some stages of the loyal relation of the state towards

religion and religious life of believers as well as rigid total extermination of priests, faiths and spiritual life of the Soviet people. The religious politics concerned every Soviet family and certainly, played a significant negative role in spiritual development of the society. Communistic values that the propaganda machine implanted into the Soviet society became a compensating component for spirituality. However, all of these are very debatable questions. Return to the Soviet history is a return to the past. While, by M. Blok's definition [25, 26], the past is a certain reality that nothing is imperious to change, but the study of the past develops, incessantly changes and improves.

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