

The Issue of Religion during the Bolshevik ERA (1917-1939)

Mingnorov Abduxoliq Toshmirzayevich

*Doctor of Historical Sciences at the Department of “The Latest History of Uzbekistan”
Tashkent State Pedagogical University named after Nizami*

Abstract. *In this article, the relationship between religion and the state during the Bolshevik era is analyzed, highlighting the ideological conflict between the Bolshevik regime, which promoted atheism and aimed to build a secular, socialist state, and the traditional religious institutions that had significant influence in society. Additionally, the article discusses how religious practices were suppressed, the strategies employed by the Bolsheviks to weaken the power of religious organizations, and the resistance from religious communities.*

Keywords: *religion, society, culture, literacy, tradition, custom, policy, periodical press, ideology, secularism, propaganda, agitation.*

Without referring to primary sources, it is impossible to fully cover the events of any era, regardless of the time period. For this purpose, the social, political, economic, and cultural processes that took place in Turkestan during the Soviet regime were approached from a class-based perspective, and Islam was interpreted as an ideology that poisoned people’s minds.

As the Bolsheviks came to power and began building a socialist society, they waged a relentless struggle against religion throughout the entire region, aiming to establish an atheist, proletarian state. The Communist regime’s policies towards religion were widely covered in the pages of the periodical press.

In order to fight against religion in the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Communists began publishing a journal titled “Khudosizlar” (“The Godless”). Since most of the articles and various pieces of information in this journal served the political system, all attention was directed against religion. This provides a clearer understanding of the Communists’ policy towards religion in Uzbekistan. By the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, combating religion had become one of the Communist Party’s primary objectives.

The mass propaganda efforts against religion consisted of two parts:

1. The propaganda component, which involved organizing lectures held in clubs and “Red Teahouses”;
2. The evening component, where various events were arranged on the eve of holidays, used as a way to attract and win over the population [1].

The Communists viewed religion as their primary enemy and increasingly intensified their persecution against it. Thus, they waged a ruthless struggle against religion, guided by slogans such as “Religion and religious organizations are enemies of the cultural revolution” [2] and “Underestimating the harmfulness of religion is tantamount to directly supporting religious ideology” [3]. The Soviet ruling authorities carried out the fight against religion everywhere: in kindergartens [4], schools [5], educational institutions [6], workplaces [7], among women [8] and in public places [9] – essentially, in all areas of society.

Lenin, the leader of the Soviet regime, wrote the following about religion: “Religion is a form of oppression consisting of spiritual despondency and helplessness. Therefore, religion finds its place only among oppressed, downtrodden people all over the world” [10]. Therefore, the Communists mandated in their anti-religion charter that “children aged 8 to 14 should be fully enrolled in young militant godless groups, and that attendance at school and work on religious holidays should be ensured at 100%” [11].

They stated, “Whoever advocates fasting, whoever encourages taking time off work to celebrate on religious holidays, is an enemy of the proletariat, a supporter of those who oppose our cotton independence, and someone who harms the five-year plan” [12], thereby establishing Bolshevik discipline in the field of education within the republic [13].

In 1928, the anti-religious movement among the masses of urban workers, collective farmers, state farm (sovkhoz) workers, and Machine Tractor Station (MTS) workers in Uzbekistan expanded so significantly by the fourth year of the first five-year socialist construction plan that it grew 13 times compared to 1928. Membership in the Union of Militant Godless increased as follows:

1. In 1928: 12,000 members;
2. In 1929: 19,000 members;
3. In 1930: 40,000 members;
4. In 1931: 90,000 members;
5. In 1932: 160,000 members [14].

In 1932-1933, to complete mass collectivization, several measures were outlined: *firstly*, the necessity of establishing Union of Militant Godless (KXS) cells at each state farm (sovkhoz), collective farm (kolkhoz), and Machine Tractor Station (MTS); *secondly*, the need for a determined struggle against those hindering the development of the anti-religious campaign in rural areas; and *thirdly*, the importance of transitioning from Arabic script to Latin script for writing [15]. The Bolsheviks’ efforts to secularize the local population were conducted not only in the republic’s capital, Tashkent, but also in remote regions [16]. While the Soviet government’s anti-religious propaganda began in Ukraine in 1922-1923, it had started two years earlier in Uzbekistan. The responsibilities of the atheists in the cultural campaign to eradicate illiteracy were:

1. The cells of the Union of Militant Godless had to broadly explain the importance of the cultural campaign to eliminate illiteracy.
2. Literate atheists needed to educate the illiterate.
3. Literacy centers had to be established, taking into account the illiterate workers in districts or villages.
4. Exhibitions and corners on topics such as “Eradicating Illiteracy and Religion” or “Illiteracy is the Enemy of Culture” were to be organized [17]. Religion was interpreted as a harmful substance, with the statement “Religion is the opium of the people” being used to describe it [18].

In 1927, the 6th plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan demanded the implementation of the resolution stating, “Whoever supports religion cannot be a member of the party” [19].

The Communists regarded anyone associated with any religion or living a religious lifestyle as enemies of the Soviet regime. The Soviet government pursued a ruthless policy against religion to achieve independence in cotton production. In Uzbekistan, the Soviet authorities aimed to create millions of ready laborers for the Soviet Union, who would provide cotton – a resource as valuable as gold – by supposedly liberating women from religious ideology. Through the cultural revolution movement, hundreds of mosques, madrasas, and architectural monuments left by our ancestors were demolished, while some buildings were converted into centers for Communist propaganda and agitation.

The Communists paid significant attention to educating local children in the “communist spirit”. There is a wealth of information on this topic found in the periodical press [20].

The propaganda declared, “Without fighting against traditions and customs, without eliminating the remnants of bourgeois influence in the economy and people’s consciousness, it is impossible to turn the workers into conscious and active builders of a classless socialist society. This slogan must serve as the basis for all our activities” [21].

In conclusion, it can be said that during the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet ideological system waged a ruthless struggle against the Islamic faith, which the local population adhered to, in order to establish its complete dominance in the region. The Bolsheviks implemented their chauvinistic policies through the fight against religion. Analyzing the policies pursued against religion in Uzbekistan after the establishment of the national republics, particularly in Turkestan, and conveying this information to our people – especially the younger generation – is one of the main tasks of today. This will help our youth enrich their worldview regarding our historical past and the Islamic faith, enabling them to draw correct conclusions.

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