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ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGNS AND RELIGIOUS REPRESSION UNDER THE TOTALITARIAN REGIME

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Abstract: This article investigates the systematic suppression of religion under the Soviet totalitarian regime, focusing particularly on the Stalinist period. The study analyzes the ideological foundations of state atheism, the legal and extralegal mechanisms used to control or eliminate religious institutions, and the socio-cultural consequences of religious persecution. Drawing on archival documents and contemporary scholarship, the paper pays special attention to how these policies affected Muslim communities in Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, where Islamic identity was deeply rooted in everyday life. The long-lasting impact of religious repression on collective memory, national identity, and contemporary religious revival is also discussed.

Keywords:religious repression, state atheism, Stalinism, Islam in Central Asia, anti-religious propaganda, Soviet Union, Uzbekistan, totalitarianism

Religion has historically played a central role in shaping the identity, values, and social fabric of many communities in the former Soviet Union, including the predominantly Muslim regions of Central Asia. However, with the rise of the Soviet regime and the consolidation of Stalin's totalitarian control, religion came to be viewed not only as a relic of the past but also as a threat to the ideological monopoly of the Communist Party.

Under Stalin, anti-religious campaigns intensified and became more systematic. Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples were closed or destroyed; religious leaders were imprisoned, executed, or sent to labor camps; and religious education was outlawed. The ultimate goal was the eradication of religious belief and the creation of a secular, ideologically pure Soviet citizen. This paper explores the methods, scope, and consequences of religious repression under the totalitarian regime, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan.

The roots of Soviet anti-religious policies lay in Marxist ideology, which viewed religion as "the opium of the people"—a tool of oppression used by ruling classes. From the early years of the Bolshevik regime, the Communist Party declared its intention to build a secular, rationalist society guided by science and socialist morality. However, under Stalin, this ideological stance transformed into a brutal campaign of repression.

Religious institutions were not only ideologically suspect; they were seen as potential centers of resistance and alternative loyalty. Clergy members often held significant influence within their communities, and their continued presence was viewed by the regime as a threat to centralized political power. Thus, the Soviet Union developed an elaborate system to dismantle religion from every angle—legal, educational, cultural, and physical.

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In Muslim-majority regions such as Uzbekistan, the anti-religious campaign took on a colonial character. Islam was not only a faith but also a source of cultural heritage, social cohesion, and historical pride. By targeting Islamic scholars, sacred sites, and religious education, the regime attempted to sever the population's connection to its own identity and assimilate it into a homogenized Soviet culture.

This research uses a historical and comparative methodology that includes:

- **Archival research** from Soviet government records and reports on religious persecution;
- **Content analysis** of anti-religious propaganda (newspapers, posters, educational materials);
- **Case studies** from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics;
- **Oral history sources** from religious communities and descendants of persecuted clerics;
- **Theoretical framework** rooted in the sociology of religion and totalitarian studies (e.g., Hannah Arendt, Weber, Bruce).

Destruction of religious infrastructure: Thousands of mosques, churches, and religious schools (madrasas) were closed or repurposed. In Uzbekistan alone, the number of functioning mosques dropped from thousands in the 1920s to only a few dozen by the late 1930s.

Persecution of religious leaders: Imams, muftis, priests, rabbis, and Buddhist monks were systematically arrested, accused of being "counter-revolutionaries," spies, or agents of foreign powers. Many were executed or sent to the Gulag.

Propaganda and indoctrination: Schools introduced courses in "scientific atheism." Religious holidays were replaced by Soviet ones, and young people were encouraged to report on religious activity within their own families.

Criminalization of religious practice: Public prayer, fasting, circumcision, and religious gatherings were penalized. Religious literature was banned and confiscated, and underground worship became risky and rare.

Impact on Islam in Uzbekistan: Islam, which was deeply embedded in Uzbek cultural and spiritual life, was especially targeted. Leading figures of the Jadid reformist movement—many of whom advocated a modern but Islamic education—were branded as reactionaries and eliminated. The Sufi orders, with strong rural influence, were outlawed, and religious education went underground.

The repression of religion under the Stalinist regime was not merely a byproduct of modernization or secularization; it was a deliberate effort to eliminate alternative sources of authority and meaning that could challenge the Communist Party's absolute power. Religious identity—whether Islamic, Christian, Jewish, or otherwise—was seen as incompatible with the Marxist-Leninist worldview that sought to replace faith with ideological loyalty.

In regions like Uzbekistan, where Islam was both a personal faith and a marker of cultural identity, the attack on religion was also an attack on national consciousness. The Soviet leadership feared that Islam could mobilize political opposition or promote regional autonomy. Thus, anti-religious campaigns in Central Asia often carried a dual character: ideological and colonial.

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Despite the ferocity of repression, religion survived—often in secret or disguised forms. Families passed down rituals and prayers in private. In rural areas, informal networks preserved religious knowledge. This quiet resistance laid the groundwork for the post-Soviet religious revival, especially visible in Uzbekistan during the 1990s and 2000s.

Yet, the psychological and social effects of decades of enforced atheism continue to be felt. A generation was raised in an environment of fear and ignorance regarding religious traditions, leading to identity confusion and social disconnection. Moreover, the association of religion with political dissent still shapes state policies in many post-Soviet societies.

The totalitarian repression of religion under Stalin was one of the most extensive and devastating campaigns of cultural erasure in modern history. While it aimed to eliminate faith from Soviet life, it instead forced it underground and inadvertently intensified its symbolic power.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the repression of Islam targeted not only spiritual life but also disrupted cultural continuity and intellectual development. The scars of this repression continue to influence contemporary religious policy and identity. Remembering this history is essential not only for honoring the victims but for safeguarding religious freedom in the future.

The Soviet campaign against religion, particularly during Stalin's rule, serves as a powerful case study in how totalitarian regimes seek to dominate not just political institutions but the very hearts and minds of individuals. Religion was attacked not only for its theological content but because it represented a form of community, tradition, and inner freedom that could not be fully controlled by the state.

Despite the immense suffering and loss caused by these repressive policies, faith persisted in hidden forms. The resilience of believers—practicing in secret, transmitting prayers orally, or finding spiritual meaning in everyday life—became acts of quiet defiance. In post-independence Uzbekistan, this buried faith re-emerged rapidly, though often in new and complex forms shaped by the legacy of Soviet rule.

Understanding the history of religious repression in Uzbekistan is essential not only for historical justice, but also for navigating contemporary questions of religious identity, tolerance, and freedom. As modern societies face new challenges related to secularism, extremism, and freedom of belief, the lessons of the totalitarian past offer crucial guidance: when belief is criminalized, society loses a vital part of its moral and cultural foundation.

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