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## Religious Associations of the Tatarian ASSR During the Khrushchev's Thaw

Liliya Galimzyanova<sup>1</sup>, Ruslan Ibragimov<sup>2</sup>,  
Aivaz Fazliev<sup>3</sup>, Chulpan Samatova<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

The relevance of this paper is due to the multicultural nature of the Russian state and the significant role of religion in the contemporary socio-cultural and political processes taking place in the country. The knowledge and analysis of the history of the relationship between government and religion in Russia in general and in its individual regions will undoubtedly contribute to a more objective understanding of the fundamental aspects of the contemporary religious situation in Russia, since many problems in this field are now, in many cases, conditioned by a certain specificity or distortions in the state's policy toward religion - in the past. In this regard, the chronological scope of the research - the ambiguous and in many respects contradictory period of the Khrushchev's "thaw" - has a great scientific and applied interest in the problems under study. The administrative and geographic scope of the study is limited to the territory of the Tatar ASSR - a region traditionally formed as multi-confessional. At the same time, the processes that took place in the religious sphere of the Tatar ASSR in many respects were characteristic of many other multicultural regions of the Soviet state. The objective of the paper is to identify the factors that conditioned the survival and functioning of religious associations of the republic under the dominating atheistic ideology and strengthening of the anti-religious administrative pressure of the state in the contradictory period of the Khrushchev's "thaw".

**Keywords:** Soviet state, Tatar ASSR, Islam, Christianity, Believers, Clergy, Atheistic propaganda.

<sup>1</sup> Senior lector, PhD, Department of world cultural heritage, Institute of International Relations, Kazan Federal University, Kremliovskaya St., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: Lilgalim@bk.ru

<sup>2</sup> PhD in History, associate professor, Department of National History, Institute of International Relations, Kazan Federal University, Kremliovskaya St., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: RuRlbragimov@ksu.ru

<sup>3</sup> PhD in History, associate professor, Department of National History, Institute of International Relations, Kazan Federal University, Kremliovskaya St., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: Aivaz.Fazliev@kpfu.ru

<sup>4</sup> PhD in History, associate professor, Kazan Cooperative Institute (branch) of the Russian Institute for Cooperation, N. Yershov St. 58, 420061, Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: global@ores.su

## **INTRODUCTION**

The presented scientific problem has long and deservedly enjoyed the close attention of the scientific community. The works published by Russian authors during the Soviet period could not stay out of the Party-ideological dogmas common for that time, in accordance with which, events in the religious sphere were considered through the prism of the domination of an atheistic world view [1-5]. At the same time, the material collected by scientists, of course, is of considerable scientific interest. Publications in the perestroika years and in the post-Soviet period were characterized by the use of new scientific approaches and the introduction of new sources into the scientific circulation [6-14]. The problem of state-confessional relations in the Soviet state throughout its history in general and during the Khrushchev's "thaw" in particular, interested foreign scholars. Given the peculiarities of the socio-cultural and ideological conditions of writing these works, the events studied received a different interpretation [15-18].

Despite a large number of works devoted to this problem, it should be noted that there were yet no studies specifically dealing with the situation of religious associations of the Tatar ASSR during the Khrushchev's "thaw". In this regard, the presented paper, to a certain extent, should fill the gap. The novelty of the work, first of all, is determined by the introduction into scientific circulation of hitherto unpublished archival sources.

During the Great Patriotic War and in the first post-war years the Soviet state went on a relative normalization of state-confessional relations [13]. However, after the end of this period, which demanded cohesion and mobilization of the whole society, power in the late 1940s again begins to tighten the policy on religion. The ruling elite saw it as a competitor capable of successfully influencing the citizens' consciousness, which was the "privilege" of official ideology only. However, the sharp transition from relatively liberal trends to a new campaign to persecute believers and clergy, the closure of prayer buildings, was undesirable, since the patriotism and spiritual and material support of religious organizations rendered to the state during the war years were still too fresh in the memory of the people. In this connection in the late 1940's the party and the Soviet government did not follow any notable decrees and orders that marked a radical revolution in relations with religious associations. Nevertheless, some steps of the state have indicated a curtailment of relatively liberal trends in the sphere of state-confessional relations.

Thus, in 1947, for the first time after the war, anti-religious propaganda resumed on the pages of periodicals in a relatively "soft" form. Komsomolskaya Pravda published articles that claimed that membership in the Komsomol was incompatible with the belief in God. Uchitelskaya Gazeta said that a believing person does not have the right to be a teacher, and also announced the "falsity" of the theory of secular education. According to the newspaper, education could only be anti-religious. The ideological organ of the CPSU – Bolshevik magazine proclaimed that the struggle against religion is a struggle against reactionary bourgeois ideology [11]. The article "The USSR" in the 2nd edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia asserted that the CPSU was intransigent towards any confession.

The above anti-religious attacks in the press were not accidental. They were a kind of precursor to the completion of a relatively liberal period in the policy of the Soviet state in the field of religion.

## ***METHODS OF RESEARCH***

The methodological basis of the research is the civilizational approach, which made it possible to study the features of the functioning of religious associations of the Tatar ASSR in a multidimensional and comprehensive format.

When writing this paper, the authors were guided by the scientific principles of historicism and objectivity. The first of them, obliged to evaluate the events and processes studied, taking into account the peculiarities of the socio-cultural characteristics of the epoch in question and the prevailing political and ideological views. In accordance with the principle of objectivity, the authors as much as possible disassociated themselves from various extra-scientific factors capable of influencing the objectivity of research: political, religious, national, social, etc.

### **RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 1950s.**

The period of the "thaw" in the history of the Soviet state in the mid-1950s - the first half of the 1960s is characterized by a relative liberalization of the socio-political life of the country, criticism of Stalin's personality cult, establishment of relations with the Western world, and the possibility of greater creative expression. All this gave impetus to the process of renewal of Soviet society, the liberation of people's consciousness from certain ideological dogmas and stereotypes. However, at the same time, the superficiality of N.S. Khrushchov's changes was manifested. In particular, the degree of permissiveness in the spiritual life was still commensurate with the basic ideological attitudes of the state. In this regard, religion, actually being an alternative to the materialistic form of worldview prevailing in the country, becomes the object of new mass attacks.

In the mid-1950s, the authorities made efforts to limit the influence of religion on society that had increased during the military and post-war years. July 7, 1954, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On major shortcomings in scientific and atheistic propaganda and measures to improve it" noted that the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam and sectarians, through well-trained sermons, skillful individual work with every potential parishioner, actively involve the younger generation in their communities and groups, as a result of which "there is an increase in the number of citizens ... performing religious rites" [19]. In this connection, the resolution provided for the new development of massive atheist propaganda in all directions, which consisted in strengthening lecture propaganda, intensifying the publication of atheistic literature, developing and implementing a series of full-length and short documentary and feature films of anti-religious content, strengthening educational work at the place of study, - in the spirit of "militant materialism" [19].

Excessive zeal and overaction of local authorities in the implementation of anti-religious decisions led to the issuance of a new resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU of November 10, 1954 "On mistakes in conducting scientific atheistic propaganda among the population" [20], designed to correct and prevent the most odious facts of infringement of the rights of believers. In particular, it recognized that "there are citizens who, actively participating in the life of the country and honestly performing their civil duty before the homeland, are still under the influence of various religious beliefs ... it is foolish and harmful to put some Soviet citizens under political doubt because of their religious beliefs" [19].

This caused a wave of appeals of believers to state bodies with petitions to establish religious associations. According to the authorized Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR for the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in 1957, believers of the republic applied 28 similar applications thereto and 50 people visited it with petition personally [21]. The most insistent representatives of religious associations applied to the Councils of Ministers of the RSFSR and the USSR. However, the functioning of the command and administrative system was built in such a way that the statement or complaint of the believers "returned" for the proceedings back to the local authorities, whose actions the applicants complained of.

Regarding the Decree of November 10, 1954, it should be said that its implementation in the Tatar ASSR was purely declarative. In comparison with the Bashkir ASSR, where in the 1950s 4 Muslim petitions on the

registration of religious associations were positively solved [12], no new religious community or group was registered in the Tatar ASSR, on the contrary, their number was cut - two Muslim associations and one Jewish were deregistered.

The decision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on February 17, 1955 did not have a significant impact on the situation of the believers of the republic, which led to that all the religious organizations actually functioning were subject to registration. In the next twelve years, no new religious community was registered in the Tatar ASSR.

### **BELIEVERS AND CLERGY IN THE PERIOD OF STATE PRESSURE ON RELIGION IN THE LATE 1950s - MIDDLE 1960s.**

In the late 1950's, the policy of the Soviet state regarding religion is considerably toughened. N.S. Khrushchev, having proclaimed the course for "the extensive construction of communism", set the task of "overcoming religion as a relic of capitalism in the minds of people". In this connection, a series of party and state decrees called upon to weaken the influence of religion in Soviet society (Decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR of October 16, 1958 "On Monasteries in the USSR" and "On Candlestick Tax" [20], Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU of January 13, 1960 "On Elimination of Violations by the Clergy of Legislation on Cults", Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR of March 16, 1961 "On Strengthening Control over the Implementation of Legislation on Cults," etc.). Means of propaganda presented religious life as an inevitable process of "degeneration" and "extinction". Basically, this postulate was based on quantitative indicators of registered religious societies, which, according to the authorities, adequately reflected the state of religious activity of the population.

In line with these messages, at the turn of the 1950's and 1960's 5 religious associations were deregistered in the Tatar ASSR. Thus, by the early 1960s there were 27 officially functioning religious associations on the territory of the Tatar ASSR.

The inconsistency and illusory nature of the aforementioned postulate of an adequate correlation of the number of registered religious associations and the level of religiosity in the country was demonstrated by the one-time recording of religious associations and clergy in 1961. It should be noted that in the Soviet Union such an event was held for the first time. It was supposed to account all the really functioning religious communities and groups. This campaign revealed 646 unofficially operating Muslim associations, as well as 366 illegally operating mullahs, 167 communities of the Russian Orthodox Church, 14 groups of evangelical Christians-Baptists, 5 sectarian groups of Old Believers, and 9 groups of sectarians of the true Orthodox Church [22]. Accounting records showed that among people engaged in religious activities, there were those who in the past held senior positions, worked in education sphere, collective farms, state farms, and in production, served in the Soviet Army. These data did not correspond to the stereotype of the time that religion affected only extremely backward and semi-literate strata of society.

The results of the account, which revealed a significant number of actually functioning religious associations and clergy in the territory of the Tatar ASSR, compelled the authorities to recognize that the number of registered religious associations did not adequately reflect the level of religiosity in the country. According to the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Tatar ASSR, D.S. Shakirzianov, "the absolute majority of believers satisfy their religious needs through unregistered religious societies, groups of believers and clergy" [22]. Thus, the fact of concentrating the entire religious life of the republic on an illegal level was also recognized. Since that time, sociological polls of the population began to be conducted on the territory of the republic, intended to obtain more objective data about the level of religiousness of citizens.

In the struggle against the religiosity of the population, the state sought to encompass all forms of its manifestation. As is known, the place of special veneration of believers was "holy places", where mass pilgrimages were carried out. With the aim of eliminating them in 1959, the Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On measures to end the pilgrimage to the so-called "Holy places". The authorities also used in their propaganda the fatwa of DUMES and the messages of the patriarchate, condemning the pilgrimage to the "holy places".

Toughening state policy in the field of religion and, as a consequence, strengthening control over the activities of believers and clergy, provided for a more active participation of power agencies in this process. Therefore, in the framework of the Decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR of March 16, 1961 "On strengthening control over the implementation of legislation on cults," law enforcement forces were also involved in preventive activity. May 30, 1961, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Tatar ASSR sent to the heads of city and district police of the republic an instruction "On increasing the role of the militia in the struggle for strict observance of Soviet legislation on religious cults". As part of its implementation, in the second half of the same year, relevant events were held. Employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were used in the fight against religion, not only in one-off large-scale events held within the framework of a campaign. Militia and militiamen also participated in ensuring order during religious holidays, in preventing meetings of unregistered religious societies.

The infringement of the rights of believers inside the country and massive atheist propaganda were combined with the authorities' desire to present themselves in a favorable light on the international arena. Since the 1960s, due to the liberalization of the foreign policy course, the role of religious organizations in contacts with similar foreign associations has been growing. In the eyes of the world community, they were supposed to serve as a confirmation of the myth of religious freedom in the USSR. Thus, there is reason to talk about a policy of "double standards" regarding the "internal" life of believers and their foreign contacts. The government of the country approved the aspiration of religious organizations to participate in religious conferences that had a peacekeeping orientation. In particular, in 1961, the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR found expedient the participation of representatives of religious organizations of the USSR in the work of a religious conference in the city of Kyoto (Japan) [23].

The authorities extend beyond allowing some believers and clergy to travel abroad. The reception of foreign religious delegations was also practiced inside the country. In this connection, one of the places included in the visiting routes is the Marjani mosque of the city of Kazan. Thus, in July 1960, the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, in agreement with the leadership of the country, invited Secretary General of the Indonesian Party Nahdatul Ulama Sayfutdin Zuhri and one of its leaders, Minister for Religious Affairs Fattah Yasini [23].

## **CONCLUSION**

Analysis of the sources characterizing the situation of religious associations during the Khrushchev's "thaw" allows us to draw the following conclusions:

- In the late 1940s the policy of the Soviet state went beyond its principles of the relative normalization of state-confessional relations that took place during the Great Patriotic War and for the first time after the war;
- After the death of I.V. Stalin, the new ruling elite shows a lack of a clear position towards religion: the CPSU Central Committee's resolution calling for the strengthening of atheistic propaganda was followed by another, which warned against excesses in the above propaganda. During this period, many religious

associations of the Tatar ASSR vainly tried to obtain registration with the state authorities, since after this procedure their activities acquired a legal character;

- In the late 1950s - mid-1960s, a new massive pressure on religion arises at the all-Union level. In this regard, five religious associations were deregistered in the Tatar ASSR, the authorities held events designed to weaken the influence of unofficially acting confessional associations.

Speaking in general about the situation of religious associations during the period of relative liberalization of the socio-political life of the country, it can be argued that believers and clergy during these years experienced a massive onslaught, as the authorities sought to finally put an end to the influence of religion in Soviet society.

In the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, this was manifested in the following actions of the authorities: 1) the period under review, no religious association was registered in the republic; on the contrary, there was a gradual reduction; 2) administrative attacks on legally functioning religious associations became more frequent; 3) recognizing the fact of the concentration of religious life at the illegal level, the authorities carried out large-scale measures to eliminate the activities of unregistered religious associations and pilgrimage to holy places.

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#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors assert that the presented article does not contain any conflicts of interests.

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