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**SOME ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN THE KAZAKH SSR IN 1950–1980s**

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**Abstract. Introduction.** The article elucidates the religious situation in the Kazakh SSR since 1950s and onwards until the perestroika time and how it affected the social life of population, its religiosity (in particular, on Islamic populace). *Goals and objectives* – to study the situation that developed after the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917. In particular, when Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they launched the process of state building on ideocratic foundations – Marxist materialistic dialectics, atheism, that denied religion as one of the key factors for civilization evolution, historical dynamics and social integrator. *Results.* Religion was declared not only a political enemy, but a competitor for societal formation. The period of 1950–1980s in the history of the Soviet regime politics towards religion is remarkable for a new approach of the administration with explicit declarations and implicit politics. The population of the Kazakh SSR was ethnically and religiously diverse, and all the ethnic groups retained ethnic identity core markers with strong religious core. The article is based on analysis of archival documents and legal acts of the state bodies of the USSR and the Kazakh SSR, official statistics, assessment of researches on the Soviet religious politics. For explanation of the Soviet politics towards religion is employed secularism – principle of separation of state and religion, minimization of its role in public sphere. Secularism implies anti-clericalism, explanation of nature and society evolution by naturalistic laws. Major methodological tools – principles of historicism, systemic approach, content- and event- analysis, discourse analysis. *Conclusion.* But despite all the policies of the soviet regime – ban and criminalization of religious practices, atheistic propaganda, the Soviet regime failed to fully control the population minds and hearts, that remained religious even in moderate way, still maintaining most of religious rites embedded in life-cycle ethnic-cultural practices.




**Keywords:** Kazakh SSR, religion, Soviet politics towards religion, Islam, atheism, propaganda


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## 1950–1980 ЖЫЛДАРДАҒЫ ҚАЗАҚ КСР-індегі ДІНИ ЖАҒДАЙДЫҢ КЕЙБІР АСПЕКТІЛЕРІ

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**Аңдатпа.** *Kіріспе.* Мақалада Қазақ КСР-дегі 1950 жылдардың басына қайта құруға дейінгі діни ахуал және оның халықтың әлеуметтік өміріне, діндарлығына (ислам дінінің әсіресе мұсылман халқына) қалай әсер еткені қарастырылады. 1917 жылы большевиктер билікке келгеннен кейін идеологиялық негізде мемлекет құруға кірісті – маркстік материалистік диалектика, атеизм, дінді өркениет дамуының негізгі факторы, тарихи динамика және әлеуметтік интегратор ретінде жоққа шығарылады. Дін тек саяси қарсылас ғана емес, сонымен бірге қоғамдық формациядағы бәсекелес ретінде де жарияланды. Кеңес мемлекетінің дін саясаты тарихында 1950 жылдардың басына 1980 жылдардың аяғына дейінгі кезең ашық мәлімдемелермен және жасырын қудалау саясатымен жаңа әкімшілік көзқараспен ерекшеленеді. Қазақ КСР халқының этникалық және діни құрамы әртүрлі болды, ал барлық этностар күшті діни өзегі бар байырғы этникалық белгілерін сақтап қалды. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Мақалада КСРО және Қазақ КСР-ның архив құжаттары мен құқықтық актілеріне, ресми статистикалық мәліметтерге, кеңестік дін саясаты мәселелері бойынша зерттеушілердің еңбектерінде келтірілген материалдарға талдау жасалған. Зайырлылық принципі кеңестік дін саясатын – дінді мемлекеттен бөлу, оның қоғамдық ортадағы рөлін барынша азайтуды түсіндіру үшін қолданылады. Зайырлылық антиклерикализмді, табиғат пен қоғамның дамуын натуралистік заңдармен түсіндіруді білдіреді. *Негізгі методологиялық әдістерге* – тарихилық, жүйелілік ұстаным, мазмұнды және оқиғаларды талдау, дискурстық талдау принциптері жатады. *Нәтижелер.* Кеңес өкіметінің жүргізген – діни әдет-ғұрыптарға тыйым салу және қылмысқа тарту, атеизмді насихаттау саясатына қарамастан, режим өмірлік циклдер мен

этномәдени тәжірибелерге енген, көптеген діни жоралғыларын сақтап (әр түрлі дәрежеде) діндар болып қалған халықтың санасы мен жүрегін толықтай бақылай алмады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қазақ КСР, дін, дінге қатысты кеңестік саясат, ислам, атеизм, насихат

**Алғыс.** Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің «Тарихи динамикадағы Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік саясат (XX ғасырдың 20–80 жж.)» тақырыбындағы гранттық қаржыландыру жобасын жүзеге асыру аясында орындалды. Жеке тіркеу нөмірі: AP23490001)

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## НЕКОТОРЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ СИТУАЦИИ В КАЗАХСКОЙ ССР В 1950–1980е ГОДЫ

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**Аннотация.** *Введение.* В статье рассмотрена религиозная ситуация в Казахской ССР с начала 1950х годов до перестройки, и как это влияло на социальную жизнь населения, его религиозность (в особенности, on Islamic на мусульманское население). *Цели и задачи исследования* – исследовать ситуацию, сложившуюся после того, как большевики пришли к власти в 1917 году. В частности, они приступили к строительству государства на идеократических основаниях – марксистская материалистическая диалектика, атеизм, который отрицал религию как ключевой фактор развития цивилизаций, исторической динамики и социальный интегратор. *Результаты.* Религия была объявлена не только политическим противником, но и конкурентом в социетальном формировании. Период с начала 1950-х до конца 1980х годов в истории религиозной политики советского государства отмечен новым административным подходом с открытыми декларациями и скрытой политикой преследований. Население Казахской ССР было разнообразным в этническом и религиозном отношениях, и все этнические группы сохраняли коренные этнические маркеры с сильным религиозным ядром. Статья основана на анализе архивных документов и правовых актов СССР и Казахской ССР, официальной статистике, материалах, изложенных в работах исследователей по советской религиозной политике. Для объяснения советской религиозной политики использован принцип секуляризма – отделение религии от государства, минимизация её роли в публичной сфере. Секуляризм подразумевает антиклерикализм, объяснение развития природы и общества натуралистическими законами. Основные

методологические приемы – принципы историзма, системный подход, контент- и ивент- анализ, и дискурс анализ. *Заключение.* Несмотря на политику советского режима – запрет и криминализация религиозных практик, пропаганда атеизма, режиму не удалось полностью контролировать умы и сердца населения, которое оставалось религиозным (в разной степени), сохраняя многие религиозные ритуалы, вписанных в жизненные циклы и этнокультурные практики.

**Ключевые слова:** Казахская ССР, религия, советская политика в отношении религии, ислам, атеизм, пропаганда

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### Introduction

The state in its internal and external policy being a socio-political institution turns to religion, because it largely determines the historical, and cultural foundations and constraints of interaction between ethnic groups, socio-cultural factors of the structural organization of society and moral and psychological value orientations of population groups. The repressive policy of the Soviet state with regard to religion forced the Soviet people to hide their religious beliefs deep into their consciousness, while a significant part of populace still remained deeply religious. The Soviet state's policy on religion was an integral part of the process of communism buildup process. It was carried out in several interrelated dimensions in internal policy (secularization, formation of a new culture, identity and person as the core of the moral qualities of the builder of communism), and in external policy (combat other models of creating one of the versions of world history and civilizational path, demonstration of the Soviet form of interaction between the state, society and religion) (Legislation of the USSR, 2015). It was important for the Soviet regime to show (and the inhabitants of the Oriental/Muslim republics proved it with their lifestyle) that socialism was not alien to the national culture of these peoples, where Islamic practices still played a significant role, but only at the domestic level. The components of the anti-Islamic policy were the introduction of a socialist mode of life, overcoming the vestiges of Islam in everyday life, the processes of internationalization, the social emancipation of women in the Soviet East, their spiritual and moral liberation, atheistic education and propaganda.

The Soviet regime politics towards religion went through several stages each determined mainly by political objectives – establishing total control over all aspects of life through strict observance and intervention (even in private one). The politics of 1920–1930s was characterized by strong degree of force, coercion, propaganda and agitation. During the World War II (or – Great Patriotic war) religion was exploited to stimulate patriotic feeling of the population and mobilize it to fight against Nazis. On May 9, 1944, the Council for Religious Cults was established, headed by state security officer K.A. Zaytsev, and later by I.V. Polyansky (Council for Religious Affairs, 1985: 414). The attitude toward Islam changed, and at the initiative of the NKGB, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided on July 31, 1943, to establish the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan – SADUM (Maslova, 2011). Religious institutes were competitors for the Soviet building socialism and then communism (New Criminal Codes). The Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of RSFR “On administrative responsibility for violation of the legislation on religious cults” was adopted on the March 18th 1966. In Kazakhstan was adopted Decree был of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR on the 3 June 1966 “On administrative responsibility for violation of the legislation on religious cults”.

## Discussion

The western scholarship has accumulated a rich body of literature on the Soviet politics towards religion – state propaganda of atheism, repressions against religion and clerics (ban of religion from public life and from all officialdom, reprisals against clergy of all denominations), general policies and its effects. But the religious situation in some republics has not been studied. Politics towards Islam in the Soviet Central Asia after Bolsheviks came to power was analyzed by A. Khalid (Khalid, 2010). The Muslim nations under the soviet anticlerical control have been analyzed by Keller S. (Keller, 2001), (Ro'i Y., 2000), (Benningsen, 1985). The effects of the Soviet combat against religions through propaganda is evaluated by D. Powell (Powell, 1967). The N. Khrushchev policy towards religion is analyzed by Marchenko A. (Marchenko, 2010).

The literature on the soviet politics towards religion by Kazakhstani scholars include the works on the role of religion in ethnicity maintenance of Sultangalieva A. (Sultangalieva, 1998), Kydyralina Z. (Kydyralina, 2007), Mukhtarova (Mukhtarova, 2007), Saktaganova Z. (Saktaganova, et al., 2014), (Saktaganov, 2017) Nurtazina N. (Nurtazina, 2008), Shapoval Y. (Shapoval, 2022), Abdrakhmanova K. (2013), Tastanova Z. (2021). Everyday life of commoners was studied by Mazhitova (Mazhitova et al.). The Soviet authorities also controlled the Orthodox Church in the Kazakh SSR monitoring all activities, intervening into internal life of the Church (Ivanov, 2024).

The article is based on analysis of the Soviet legislative acts of the USSR (Zakonodatelstvo o relig. Kultah) and Kazakh SSR (Saktaganova, Tasbulatova, 2014), reports of the commissioners of religious cults in the Kazakh SSR. For explanation of the Soviet politics towards religion is employed secularism – principle of separation of state and religion, minimization of its role in public sphere. Secularism implies anti-clericalism, explanation of nature and society evolution by naturalistic laws (Kurilov, 2022). Major methodological tools – principles of historicism, systemic approach, content- and event-analysis, discourse analysis.

## Results

Religious variety in Kazakhstan Historically the Kazakh SSR became a home for different ethnic groups, who professed Islam, versions of Christianity (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Old Believers), and Judaism. The religious diversity in the Kazakh SSR resulted from arrival various ethnic groups into its territory, their establishment as state-forming ones. Islam was the religion of many peoples who were deported to Kazakhstan during Stalin's ethnic cleansing, although versions of Islam varied. Kazakhs, Tatars, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Uighurs, Balkars, Karachais, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, Dungans, and Tajiks were Muslims. For many ethnic groups, the religious component was determinant as an ethnic marker, in the need to erect a kind of cultural and moral-psychological barrier in relations with other ethnic groups and the interpretative lenses of the state course. Muslims of the Kazakh SSR belonged to two main branches of Islam – Sunni (majority) and Shia (minority), within which there was an even each internally divided by legal schools and Sufi orders. However, all of them were perceived by the Soviet regime (as well as by external interested observers) as an ummah and the territory of the republic as part of the Islamic world. In the Kazakh SSR in 1960s there was one synagogue, one Armenian church, one Baptist community and one mosque, compared to 1910, when 36 mosques were registered in Chimkent, 4 in Perovsk, 5 in Kazalinsk and 21 in Aulie-Ata (Mustafina, 1992: 29).

The Soviet regime fought for its citizens and the right to determine their identity, all aspects of daily life, social and political position. The hierarchy of identities of the peoples of the Kazakh SSR contradicted the Soviet (in Stalin's interpretation) taxonomic titlature:

Table 1

Soviet	Soviet people, Soviet nationalities, ethnic minorities
Ethnic (people of Central Asia and Kazakhstan)	Tribal, ethnic, Muslim/Turkic identity Civic identity – Soviet people was used in the official discourse of representatives of groups that went to power



*Compiled by the author.*

The Soviet statistics could not give the exact number of religious believers for the whole country or for the republics. Secret Koranic schools were active in Central Asia. Since the 1950s, Salafism was spreading. Chechens were the most closed of the Muslim groups; they were followers of the Kadiyya tariqat (Sufism). Sufism among Kazakhstan's Chechens remains poorly studied due to the closed nature of the Chechen community and the language barrier.

The Islamic world in Kazakhstan during the Soviet era was not unified with different divisions. Many of them differed by the degree of loyalty to the Soviet state, its governing legal and institutional mechanisms, and internal theoretical and practical fault lines – into conservatives, fundamentalists and reformers (Jadids). Fundamentalists appealed to a literal reading of the Koran and believed that its reform was impossible without a return to its origins. Anti-religious or atheistic work among them was particularly difficult because while certain provisions of Islam and forms of explanation of world order and patterns of navigation (according to official authorities) had disappeared, many practices were ingrained into an ethno-cultural identity, and hierarchically constructed and maintained internal order – clan schemes, rites, rituals and life cycle transitions, gender code, forms and modes of social communication. Some Muslim rituals were observed – marriage/neke, mostly in the rural South, death rites – funeral complex, dieting and commemoration (The leaders of Central Asia). However, most Muslims were not well acquainted with the basic tenets of the faith, did not observe fasting, but strictly followed a ritual circumcision rite (sundet) as a physical sign of belonging to umma (Mustafina, 1992: 77).

The main body that regulated and controlled issues related to religious denominations was the Council for Religious Denominations under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The Muslim population was under the jurisdiction of SADUM. It also pursued an active anti-religious policy, which included bans on pilgrimages to "holy places": "On March 7, 1945, the Council of People's Commissars of the Uzbek SSR, by Resolution No. 410, transferred seven mazars most visited by believers (and previously closed by the state) from the jurisdiction of the Department of Architecture under the Council of People's Commissars of the Uzbek SSR to the use of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan" (Akhmadullin, 2016: 88). Official holy places did not last long. Already in the late 1940s. their withdrawal from believers has begun. February 21, 1950 The Council of Ministers of the USSR issued Decree No. 2204-rs, which seized most of the buildings of Shah Zind from SADUM. Decree No. 9363-rs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR dated June 18, 1950 authorized the Uzbek authorities to seize Shakhimardan and Bahautdin from SADUM. On June 30, 1951, by decision No. 969-rs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the mausoleum of Hakim-at-Termezi was seized from SADUM. However, the withdrawal was compensated by the fact that the authorities transferred new mazars to the use of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan until 1956. At the beginning of 1960 There were already 18 mazars in use by the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Akhmadullin, 2016: 87). According to official data, by May 30, 1959, there were 20 Muslim holy sites identified by the authorities in the Kazakh SSR (Akhmadullin, 2016: 92). The task to combat pilgrimage to the holy places, was assigned to the spiritual administrations of Muslims. In February 1959, a fatwa against pilgrimages to "holy places" was issued by the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. May 4, 1960 The Soviet authorities took measures to protect the mazars with historical value. For example, during the construction of Algiers (Karaganda region) it was strictly forbidden to use adobe bricks from the walls of Kazakh burial grounds (however, that prohibition was violated in practice) (Akhmadullin, 2016: 65–66). Visiting "holy places" was criminalized, under consideration as activities related to the spread of religious superstition among the population (Resolution). A Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On Measures to Stop Pilgrimage to so-called Holy Places" was adopted in 1958. Ten years later (on February 1969), the Council for Religious Affairs reported to the CPSU Central Committee on the results of the fight against "holy places" in the regions with Islamic population. The mazar of auliye ata Karakhan and the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi were turned into anti-religious museums, and the mazar of Arslan-bab became a district atheist house (Akhmadullin, 2016: 104).

In 1959, there were 839 actually functioning Muslim holy places (ziyarat, auliya) according to the Council for Religious Denominations' information (Saktaganov, Mazhitova, 2017: 195–204). 18 holy places were officially handed over to Muslim spiritual administrations, which forbade pilgrimage to them. The anti-religious combat was carried out by turning the holy places into parks, creating rest houses, pioneer camps and sanatoriums on their territory. Under the pressure of the Soviet authorities, the leaders of confessions were forced to issue bans on pilgrimages to holy places, from which they used to receive considerable income. The holy places themselves were confiscated from believers. In 1960, the government issued a decree withdrawing 13 mazars previously given to SADUM by the state. They were placed under the supervision of the republican committees for the protection of monuments of material culture.

In Kazakhstan, the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh SSR in 1976 approved the Regulation on Religious Associations, which repeated the provisions of the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Soviet of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of 8 April 1929 On Religious Associations' (O religioznykh ob'edineniyah).

In Kazakhstan, from the early 1960s to the late 1980s, there was an average of 500–600 registered and unregistered religious organizations. The number of unregistered organizations exceeded the registered ones by 3–5 times. Most of the unregistered structures belonged to Evangelical Christian Baptist, Lutheran, Islamic and Orthodox denominations.

Table 2. In 1964, the following statistics were given on the number of believers in the USSR

Confession	Number of believers
Orthodoxy	35,000,000
Islam	15,000,000
Old Believers	5,000,000
Evangelical Christians Baptists	4,000,000
The Roman Catholic Church	3,500,000
Lutherans	900,000
Judaism	500,000
Calvinists	90,000
Mennonites	10,000
Total	64,000,000

#### *How the commissioners on religious cults worked*

For control over religious communities was set up Council on religious cults under the Council of Ministers of the USSR on May 9, 1944, headed by state security officer K.A. Zaytsev, and later – by I.V. Polyansky. The attitude towards Islam changed, and at the initiative of the NKGB, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided on July 31, 1943, to establish the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In the union republics were appointed commissioners on religious cults. The Commissioners for Religious Affairs were the direct agents of State policy to religious denominations. They had to work locally with the authorities on all issues relating religion. The commissioner's candidacy was selected by the party organs from local communists, but approved in Moscow. Institute of Religious Affairs Commissioners became part of the system of executive bodies and was funded from the republican budget. Conditions were created for the work of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs – a separate office for the reception of clergy and believers; the workplace of the secretary-typist, separate from the office of the Commissioner. In the Kaz. SSR the Commissioner was directly subordinate to the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR. There was a commissioner for religious affairs in each region. In the Kazakh SSR that position first was assigned to Nygmet Sabitov. (CSA RK. F. 1711. Op. 1. D. 4.12. L. 1). He was instructed by the chairman of the Council of religious cults under the CM USSR Polyansky to speed up the process of appointing representatives/executives in 9 oblasts (CSA RK. F. 1711. Op. 1. D. 4.12. L. 7). That was done by the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1945 (CSA RK. F. 1711. Op. 1. D. 4.12. L. 68).

In one of the documents sent by N. Sabitov to Polyansky is given an account of his (of N.Sabitov) business trip in Jambul oblast from 16<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> November. I went there by the task of the Central Committee of the Communist party of Kazakhstan. The purpose was to read lectures

"On 30-year anniversary of the Kazakh SSR". Sabitov was in Jambul and Merke village (Merke raion) and delivered several lectures. At the same time, he familiarized with the life of religious communities, oblast executive on religious cults and degree of the local people religiosity. He concluded his observations: "In Jambul oblast the head of mosque is Zupnun Zinnunov (since 1948). He is hoja by origin. Spiritual education – secondary. He learned from famous Kenzhe - mullah (Chimkent city). No secular education... The community comprises a big number of believers out of Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Dungans, Tatars and special settlers (Chechens and others)... The group of believers living on Namangan Street intend to build a new mosque. For that end they collected money from believers, made bricks and woods without permission... Earlier in Jambul there were several Uzbek mosques with big boilers (qazans). They were used for cooking meat or plov and treated those coming for prayer. Boilers were seen as "holy" dishes. During the anti-religious campaign of 1930, the mosques were closed (and were demolished, obviously, while the clergy was repressed, or went "underground") and only boilers left. The local people used them for various kinds of religious gatherings – funerals, commemorations, weddings, as they (boilers) allegedly possessed certain sacral quality (i.e. were prayed for) and it was viewed as a god loving case to use them – "sauab". "For use of boilers the believers reimburse (in food or money). Thus, the boilers, on one side, turned into income source for some people, and on the other side, are used for cultivating religious traditions through them". N. Sabitov took some measures to halt such practices: "I directed the oblast executive of the Council to recommend the community Council evict those boilers and keep them in the mosque's storage, and not to give anyone for religious purposes". Thus, as the executive thought, through control over boilers he could downgrade the populace religiosity (Report of the commissioner of the Council, 1950).

The work of executives on religion was not effective as described by N. Sabitov in Merke raion: "Oblast executive of the Council has been since October 1949 comrade Aitmagambetov, CPSU (b) member, Kazakh by nationality. Secondary education... 1) The work of comrade Aitmagambetov until present time was limited to "observation" over three registered communities. 2) Not studied the state of religion among rural population, in particular among special settlers... 4) Comrade Aitmagambetov does not inform the oblast executive committee of the CP (b) Kazakhstan on religious situation and does not provide copies of quarterly reports. 5) Quarter reports of comrade Aitmagambetov that he submits to the Council and its republican executive are of low quality, do not reflect the real situation of various cults in the oblast ..." (Report of the commissioner of the Council, 1950).

*The Soviet politics towards religion in 1960–1980s* was primarily anti-clerical. That included control over the mass media, censorship over the content of literary works, and conducting anti-religious lectures and seminars for general public and in the educational institutions. The faculties of history, philosophy and economics at the Marxism-Leninism University of Alma-Ata in 1957 introduced the discipline of scientific atheism, which soon became a mandatory subject in all universities for all majors, and they also taught dialectical materialism.

Such factors as the introduction of secular education, repressions against ministers of religion, atheistic propaganda, introduction of civil rituals into everyday life, transition from Arabic script to Cyrillic, formation of consciousness and culture of the population in cultural houses, closure of churches and mosques, ban on religious education contributed to the decrease in the level of religiosity level among the population of the Kazakh SSR, as well as the entire Soviet Union (Roi, 1984: 26–44). Purposefully were introduced changes in the practice of sanitary and hygienic norms (according to medical, not religious principles), rites of age passage, name giving, planning of living quarters, dieting - pork became one of the key ingredients in the food ration in public canteens and was introduced into family cuisine (as the sausage making technique included pork as the most important ingredient).

Khrushchev's anti-religious policy was, in fact, a return to the Stalinist model of repressive policy toward religion, since the USSR had already begun building communism, and religion was seen as a relic of the past, and even as an internal enemy (Sazonov, 2015). The Moral code of communism builder incorporated all the fundamental components of the Biblical commandments,

therefore religious denominations were seen not just as relics of the past, but as ideological opponents (The moral code, 1964). A series of anti-religious decrees were adopted that significantly restricted the activities of religious institutions and increased the tax burden, and persecution of clergy began. That policy was in line with the Khrushchev administration's program statements about the advent of the era of universal prosperity – communism. In the early 1960s, regular All-Union meetings of the Council's commissioners in charge of religious affairs were held, where the main topics that required serious attention were considered – ban on pilgrimages to holy places, control over the repair of religious and cult structures and prayer buildings, protection of children and teenagers from religious influence, increase of parental responsibility for children upbringing, etc.

The Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU of January 16, 1961 "On Strengthening Control over the Activities of the Church" denounced a number of legislative acts adopted during the World War II right after the war. As a result, control over the activities of the clergy was strengthened (Sazonov, 2015: 32–37).

Measures taken to combat religion included broad mass political and scientific atheistic propaganda, publication of atheistic literature revealing the false anti-scientific nature of pilgrimage and holy places, and exposing the activities of individuals and organizations that used holy places for selfish purposes. In Kazakhstan, the number of holy places has halved over the given period. On the basis of the Decision "On measures to stop pilgrimage to the so-called "holy places", 13 out of 26 holy places were closed in the Kazakh SSR (AP RK. F. 708., Op. 34. D. 1651. L. 174). The holy spring "Ayak-Kalkan" (Almaty region) became a resort, the mausoleum of Ukach-ata – a summer pioneer camp, "Uzun-ata" – a veterinary station (Aunasova, 2007: 37). The publication of anti-religious literature in different languages of the USSR increased, from January 1, 1962 to December 31, 1964, 210 kinds of literature were published in the USSR, and 50 of them in Kazakh language (Mustafaeva, 2012).

The number of mosques and Muslim clerics from the 1950s through the late 1980s ranged from 20 to 29, and the number of registered clerics from 25 to 59, including imams, muezzins, and mullahs. By 1961, construction of religious buildings had ceased, mosque revenues had declined, and atheist propaganda had improved (CSA RK. F. 81. Op. 89. L 43). By ethnicity, Muslim clerics were mostly Kazakhs. For example, in 1960, out of 25 imams, 21 were Kazakhs, 3 were Uzbeks, and 1 was a Tatar. In 1946, of the 17 people who applied for religious studies at the madrasa in Bukhara, 11 were Kazakhs, 3 Tatars, 1 Dungan, and 1 Uighur (a re-emigrant from China) (CSA RK. F. 171. Op. 1. D. 238. L. 100).

Islamic religious education was permitted, anyway, but in limited scope. Thus, in 1946, the Miri Arab madrasa was opened in Bukhara, and later the Barakkhan (1956–1961, Tashkent). In 1971, the Higher Institute of SADUM was opened. But the goal of the Soviet authorities was "to form a special type of loyal Soviet imam", with a new mindset, a new dress code, in which the tie was to symbolize agreement with the secular authorities, complete renunciation of the "old world" and, thus, the old ways of teaching" (Khalilova, Babadjanov, 2017: 30). Among the total number of Miri Arab graduates, for instance, 17 were from Kazakhstan (Khalilova, Babajanov, 2017: 43).

Religious institutions were seen as competitors for the Soviet government, which was building a happy future (Smirnov, 2018). The 1977 Constitution separated religion from the state and declared freedom of faith. However, the state strictly controlled outward displays of religious affiliation, and especially the involvement of children in religious practices. About 40 religious denominations were officially listed in the USSR. The Soviet legislation legally restricted the activities of religious associations in terms of organization, ownership of property, religious practices and pilgrimage.

After *L.I. Brezhnev came to power*, there was some shift from the restrictions introduced under Khrushchev. In particular, court decisions on persecution of believers were halted, and the system of punishment was softened – fines for holding religious events were introduced. But the very number of religious associations was reduced:



Table 3. The decline of religious associations from 1960–1969

Religious associations	1960	1969
Total number of churches of all religions, including	20914	16321
The Russian Orthodox Church	13008	7352
The Muslim cult	2307	962
The Catholic cult	1179	1096
The Jewish cult	259	226

Source: Nabiyeu, A. Islam and the State: Cultural-Historical Evolution of the Muslim Religion in the Eastern Europe.

The Council for Religious Affairs monitored the activities of the clergy, although historian V. Akhmadullin states that the statistics provided to the Council for Religious Affairs by its local Representatives were not often unreliable, but were also “edited” by local representatives of the party and state apparatus (Akhmadullin, 2016: 104): “The Council's Commissioner for Kazakhstan reported in 1960 on its suspension of several ministers of religion for minor deviations from established restrictions. “Incomov Sabit promoted the discovery of a new mazar field for pilgrimage near Uralsk, declaring it a holy place. Nurmagambet Abdykhalyk committed a number of violations in the collection of voluntary donations, did not adhere to the advice and installation given by him, and fueled clan disputes among the believers. Tamsutdinov Akhletdin was released for a number of reasons, as he allowed violation of the Soviet legislation on cults” (Information from the Commissioner, 1960).

#### *Atheistic propaganda*

The Soviet regime spent enormous resources to combat religion - mass media, atheistic literature – books, brochures, posters, lectures, anti-religious museums and holding collective and individual meetings and classes and talks on the harm of religion and religious prejudice. The scientific invalidity of religion was proved by criticizing folk traditions and prejudices, revealing the anti-scientific essence of religious practices, and promoting Soviet rites and practices. There was a direct attack on religion, Islam, in particular, an anti-religious works of the classics – Marx, Lenin, etc. – translation into Kazakh language. Sociological surveys were conducted to find out the degree of religiosity of different groups of the population, lectures and conversations on atheistic topics were held, visits to believers and their families were organized, and the main emphasis was placed on distracting the younger generation from the influence of believers.

Table 3. Publication of anti-religious materials in the USSR, 1957–1964

Year	Newspaper articles	Books or pamphlets	Articles in periodicals
1957	31	91	69
1958	104	155	117
1959	204	312	233
1960	117	319	343
1961	97	329	248
1962	123	243	324
1963	115	289	324
1964	130	284	299

\*Source: Powell David, The effectiveness of Soviet Anti-Religious propaganda

It was assumed that the cardinal changes in the socio-economic life of the country's population under the political leadership of the Communist Party would also be reflected in changes in the population's consciousness and spiritual life. But the inner life of family and ethnic/clan practices turned out to be more conservative than Soviet ideologists had assumed.

Obkoms, gorkoms and rayon committees carried out atheist work; activities included holding regular atheist clubs and councils, lectures, political education offices, universities of scientific and atheist propaganda, circles, lectures. The work was carried out in groups and individually, the titles of arrangements varied depending on the creativity of the leaders and performers. Public events to introduce secular rites were also invented and popularized – weddings, retirements, honoring labor heroes, becoming part of community work, etc.

However, according to reports from the regions, there were still problems with religious observance, even among Communists: "...the former secretary of the district party committee in charge of ideological issues, comrade Kurbanbaev, and his brother, editor of a district newspaper, organized a religious funeral for his mother. Kurbanbaev paid money and cloth to the mosque for his services in organizing the funeral. Wearing a dressing gown, with a stick in his hands, he greeted with a low bow travelling mullahs and servants of the local mosque who arrived for the funeral. That fact was known to the members of the bureau and the first secretary of the district party committee, comrade Beisembayev, but they neglected it. Kurbanbayev continued working as the district committee secretary and only on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September this year was fired by decision of the Chimkent regional party committee bureau (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 40. D. 233. L. 1–6). As atheist work was carried out, the general state of religiosity of the population was monitored. For example, in the southern areas of the republic high religiosity was noted: "In Turkestan district religious prejudices are closely intertwined with feudal-bai rudiments, which are supported and revived by preachers of Islam. Cases of girls kidnapping, marrying off minors, humiliating and insulting women are common. In 1964, the district prosecutor's office brought 46 people to criminal responsibility for offences related to the feudal-bai attitude towards women, and 23 people in the first 10 months of this year" (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 40. D. 233. L. 1–6).

In the course of atheist work, "discoveries" were often made. For example, in the Aktobe Oblast, during a planned event (1968) – a visit to a gathering of sectarians and individual conversations with believers – about 200 people of Mennonite Baptist believers were identified in Batamshi village; although their sect was not registered (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 44. D. 1675. L. 14–18).

On a regular basis, the process of atheist work and anti-religious policy were monitored by oblast, and relevant resolutions were taken. On 23 June 1969, the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR adopted a resolution "On the unsatisfactory state of control over the implementation of legislation on religious cults". The taken measures were to improve control over the observance of legislation on religious denominations, to keep records of actually operating religious associations and places of pilgrimage of believers. Unauthorized construction of new mosques, churches and houses of worship was detected and suppressed. In Kazakhstan unregistered mullahs and persons performing religious rites were detected in 1969 – 150, 1970 – 490, 1971 – 432, 1972 – 482, 1973 – 533 (Informatsionny otchet, 1973). The Muslim population was forced to conceal the performance of rituals according to the Muslim canons: "For example, in the Kazakh SSR, 426 circumcisions were recorded in 1972, and none in 1973" (Informatsionny otchet, 1973). The authorities monitored the activities of Islamic structures – financial part of conducting rituals and readings the Koran where Muslims used to gather: "In two districts of the Kokchetav region, the Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs, in coordination with local authorities, introduced the position of a wandering mullah, who is accountable to the executive body of the registered association operating in Kokchetav, receives a salary from the mosque's treasury, and must hand over to the mosque the money received for performing funeral rites and reading the Koran in the homes of believers. In the last quarter of 1973, two wandering mullahs deposited about 4,000 rubles in the mosque's treasury. At the same time, the introduction of these positions has significantly reduced the activity of wandering mullahs" (Informatsionny otchet, 1973).

The decisions of the XIV Congress of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU indicated the ways to improve ideological work and propaganda of scientific atheism. Resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On strengthening the atheistic education of the population" and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan "On the state of scientific-atheistic and international education in secondary schools of Karaganda region" (23 June 1971) were binding on all Soviet bodies, and they regularly reported on the work accomplished.

The message of the Pavlodar Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan from 19 January 1974 read that "in recent years there has been an activation of some sects of Baptists – schismatics. In recent years, 7 new groups and communities of Baptist Christians (Baptists) have appeared in the region. There were 51 religious associations in the region, including

three registered ones: the Russian Orthodox Church, a Muslim mosque, and Baptist prayer houses in Pavlodar and Kachir settlement. Along with the registered ones, 47 religious communities operate illegally in the region, including 12 communities of supporters of the so-called ‘Council of Churches’, 12 communities of the so-called “Council of Churches”, 12 communities of schismatics of the Baptist Church, and 12 communities of the “Council of Churches”. – Baptist schismatics, 12 Lutheran, 3 Catholic, 5 Pentecostal, and 16 Baptist communities” (Information on atheist work in Pavlodar region). The complex of measures adopted by the Regional Committee included delivering lectures, seminars, classes in schools of atheism, educational work among believers. All reports are classified.

Atheist education was seen as one of the key factors in the formation of a communist worldview among the masses. In Pavlodar, the Council for Atheist Education was established with 13 members, including representatives of Communist party and Soviet Komsomol bodies, the best atheist lecturers, and teachers of social disciplines at universities (Information from Pavlodar on atheist education).

Table 4. In total, the following number of events were held on atheistic topics in the republic

	1971	1972
Lectures	2476	4359
Conversations	24636	22803
Radio	247	264
Published articles in newspapers	25	74
Sanitary bulletins	597	648
Themed evenings	10	18
-evenings of questions and answers		104
-exhibitions	53	47
- atheist meeting places	127	161
film screenings	1473	957
TV programs	18	9

\*Data for 1972 are incomplete because annual reports by oblasts will be provided later

By 1972 there were 513 associations in the republic, of which 402 were operating without registration. The reasons for not registering them were that the local authorities did not consider applications for registration in the legal way, but took administrative measures if believers held services. That, in turn, caused denial of the state policy, distrust and even anger of believers, which could become an incitement to extremist actions (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 58. D. 2024. L. 36–37). The report of K. Kulumbetov, the Commissioner of the Council for Religious Cults under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, indicated that as of 1 January 1973, 53 associations of the Muslim cult were registered in the Kazakh SSR, including 26 registered ones, served by 37 mullahs. They were engaged in conducting funeral and memorial rites, festive namazes, naming, circumcisions and weddings. In 1972, 4,310 in-person and 1,705 in absentia funerals, 56 name giving rites, 618 weddings, and 426 boys circumcisions were performed in registered mosques. A total of 4729 other religious ceremonies were performed. Compared to 1971, the number of religious funerals and circumcisions increased from 20 to 426. That was explained by the lack of record keeping in previous years. Rites were held even for communists: “According to the data of the commissioner of Chimkent region, in 1972 in Chimkent city the following communists were buried with observance of religious rites: Auelbaev Asan and Junusbekov Sagymbek – teachers of Chimkent pedagogical institute, Kabdulin Kaliakpar – worker of regional state justice, Tursumetov Abdugali – worker of out-of-department security of regional police. In the same way the funeral rites of 9 communists in Arys city were performed” (Information report from Isakov, 1972).

Anti-religious work was evaluated by the commissioners for religious affairs and members of the “twenty” group, and by the executive bodies of religious associations (Information from Isakov, 1972).

In the report on the state of scientific and atheistic education of students in the schools of the republic on the Ministry of Education of the KazSSR as of 30 January 1974 it was noted that the new content acquired new work on scientific and atheistic and international education in connection with the preparation and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the USSR creation, elaborated the topics

of Soviet patriotism and proletarian internationalism, eternal friendship, the achievements of five year plans, opened prospects due to the solution of problems set by the Congress of the CPSU. Those themes were to be propagandized in classes of history, social studies, geography, literature and others (Information on atheistic education from Pavlodar, 1974). The combat against religious vestiges was waged, issues of atheistic education were discussed at meetings. A list of features, chronicle-documentary and popular science films on atheism was compiled, which in mandatory way were shown in cinemas (AP RK. F. 708., Op. D. L. 3–7). The State Committee of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR on Cinematography sent the list of recommended films to lower structures.

By the mid-1970s, the "Regulation on Religious Associations in the Kazakh SSR" was issued and adopted for implementation, that confirmed the control over the activities of religious associations by state structures (Regulation on Religious associations).

However, in the early 1980s, serious violations of religious legislation were noted. The report of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs S. Totanov stated: "In the course of the inspection it was established that in the region almost every deceased from the local population, and party and Soviet activists are buried according to religious rites with the attendance of mullahs, huge tomb are erected like medieval mausoleums with Islamic symbols. These structures are erected mainly on the graves of the deceased ones who relate to the local leadership. Thus, for example, in the cemetery of Guryev city 'mausoleums' are built on the graves of Yerkenov A., former secretary of the party committee of the regional automobile trust; Aitzhanov B., former chairman of the regional sovprof (trade union leader), member of the bureau of the regional committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan; Dosmukhambetov J., former head of the association 'Embanef'. Near the village of Novobogatinskoye 'mausoleums' are built on the graves of I.O. Zhuketaev, former chief engineer of the state farm, member of the CPSU; A.E. Taspayev, district inspector of the militia, member of the CPSU, etc. Similar phenomena are typical for many other settlements of the region. According to the calculations of construction engineers, up to 10 thousand pieces of silicate bricks, more than 3 tons of cement and other materials are used for the construction of such mausoleums. The construction lasts for several days by 6–8 workers and costs about 6–8 thousand rubles. The question arises: where from the deficit materials for these structures' construction are obtained and what kind of craftsmen 'create' them in such a splendid fashion. These facts show that the funeral business in many places is actually in the hands of the Muslim clergy, who organize some kind of competition who would build a better and more beautiful mausoleum, who could host more people and spend more money on funeral ceremonies. Such wastefulness would negatively impact on the family budget of the deceased relatives. Despite such negative phenomena, which contradict the Soviet legislation, the local authorities do not restrict the illegal activities of Muslim worshipers, especially the unregistered mullahs, who are generously rewarded for their services. Meanwhile, on the day of the inspection, not a single 'out-of-state' minister of religion was subjected to income tax by the financial authorities. Similar tolerant attitude to religion was observed in the East Kazakhstan region: "There is a clearly conciliatory attitude towards illegal activities of mullahs, therefore up to 80 per cent of deceased Kazakhs are buried with mullahs' attendance. There are 7–40-day annual gatherings with the invitation of a large number of people, slaughter of livestock, drinking alcohol and participation of mullahs. At funerals often are present party functionaries and Soviet activists of the district, as it was, for example, at the commemoration of the mother of the head of the department of personnel management of agriculture Uzhkibayev / and many others, about whom the district party committee and district executive committee were aware/ but proper evaluation of such facts is not given. From the conversation with the mullahs, it turns out that they cannot not refuse taking part in funerals, as they (people) come and ask for them, that they receive 2–3 thousand rubles a year for performing rituals, without paying income tax' (Information from Akhmetzhanov). As the commissioners noted, that was the result of weak atheistic work and lack of trained specialists (Information of the Authorized Council, 1982).

The information of the Commissioner for Religious Affairs of Aktobe region for 1983 reported that the scientific-materialistic picture of the world was still not fundamental among the inhabitants



of the region, especially in rural areas: "All 15 people, as they stated themselves, believe in Allah, recognize Mohammed as a prophet, the Koran's holy nature, believe in the afterlife, heaven and hell. The main manifestations of religiosity in the neighborhood are Muslim funerals, the forms and means of commemoration. They say that they do not bury the dead without the rite of janaza, as the mullah is still needed therefore, he is invited". Out of the other Islamic basic tenets in the region, some Muslims (Kazakhs and Tatars) observed fasting (oraza), performed namaz and boys' circumcision (sundet), but the latter mostly for safety reasons is performed in hospitals by doctors. There were unregistered mullahs in the region, who in opinion of the commissioner must be put into custody (Letter from Amirov). Commissioner for Aktobe region Amirov J. informed the Temir district committee of the Communist party of Kazakhstan Mr. Nurzhanov R.N., Temir district executive committee Mr. Krapivnaya R.A. about the religious situation and facts of violation of legislation on religious cults in the Temir district (Letter from Amirov). In particular, he pointed out at the observance of a number of rites by population – circumcision, memorial rituals, construction of mazars, and gave a list of officially registered and self-appointed mullahs: "... quite a few mausoleums were built by Communists, who still hold important leadership positions. In the city of Temir and in the district center, both believers and party, Soviet workers of the district, and representatives of the intelligentsia speak with indignation about the attitude of comrade S. Maushev to religion, who, as the director of the state farm, built two huge Islamic mausoleums of two or three floors in the cemetery of Temir, that cost about 4–5 thousand rubles each, and now, as chairman of the village council, he is hiding from accounting three self-appointed mullahs, two of them wander outside the village council" (Letter from Amirov).

Ethno-cultural practices and rituals of population, especially in the Muslim republics, contained a religious component. In 1981, the CPSU Central Committee prepared another anti-religious resolution 'On Strengthening Atheist Education'.

On 14 May 1986, the Ministry of higher and secondary education of the Kazakh SSR informed that 'special attention is paid to one of the aspects of communist education – scientific atheistic education, propaganda of atheistic knowledge'. As part of the activities, special courses on atheism and seminars on criticism of religion (especially Islam) were developed and introduced into the educational process (AP RK. F. 708. Op. 139. D. 219).

It was only in the late 1980s that we can talk about the cessation of atheist persecution in the USSR. But the country's leadership realized that there was a serious struggle for the minds and moods of the population: 'Gorbachev: The influence of Islam is growing. Our document (Politburo resolution) should not look like we are starting a combat Islam, with believing people. We should fight the anti-Soviet consequences of religious extremism. There is a philosophical and political aspect to this. We should try to reduce religiosity, to channel this need to another direction. Otherwise, we will be accused of being against our own laws on religious freedom. But everyone is equal before the law – representatives of all religions, all believers and non-believers. What to do? We need a strong constructive program. If we offer nothing to the people, whom can we blame? Political, social isolation is an environment for religion. It is necessary to draw people to open intellectual debates on the issues the religion deals with' (In the Politburo: 70). In 1990, the USSR law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations' was adopted, which radically changed the nature of relations between the state and religious organizations (Saktaganova, 2016: 72).

In 1960–1970s the *combat against folk traditions* was waged, as they contained strong religious component. In Kazakh family building practices still were observed bride kidnapping (alyp qashy), dowry payment (qalyn mal), child math-making (besik quda). Appeals to nature for rain in drought times (tasattyq) still were practiced. Although bride kidnapping contradicted Islamic code. Southern Kazakhstan provided numerous examples of the religiosity – there were many unregistered mosques, religious rites were performed by unregistered mullahs, who could be noticed in any aul and were must actors at wedding ceremonies, funerals, commemorations. The authorities were aware of that, were taking measures to stop such activities, and decrease the influence of clergy on population.

*Changes during perestroika*

During the perestroika times the politics towards religion changed and it was recognized as part of cultural heritage and part of social indicator. In the Kazakh SSR situation towards religion changed as well, as it was reported in the information of the executive of the Council to the new head of the republic N. Nazarbayev in 1988 (Information of Sauranbayev).

On the initiative of the 22 of September the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Kazakh SSR comrade Nazarbayev N.A. received the representative of the Central Spiritual Administration for Kazakhstan kazi R. Nysanbayev, naib-imam of Alma-Atinskaya mosque Z. Imonov, mutavali of that mosque M. Telenbayev, and bishop of Alma-Atinsky and Kazakhstansky Yeysavii, secretary of diocesan administration I. G. Slusar and rector of Nikolsky Cathedral V.A. Zakharov.

During the conversation N.A. Nazarbayev talked about broadening democratization and openness, acceleration of social-economic development and upgrade of the population well-being. The most important point was restoration on Leninist principles to religion... The representatives of the Muslim and Orthodox Christian religions expressed gratitude for the meeting and talked about activities of the clergy meeting; they asked several questions: on construction of new mosque in Alma-Ata; transfer of Mickhailo-Arkhangelsky cathedral in Uralsk (closed in 1961) to the believers; registration of the female monastery under the temple of the Russian Orthodox church in Tselinograd; support in acquisition of automobiles; allocation of dacha plots to clergy. The requests were submitted for consideration to oblast executive committees, ministries and departments.

Religious organizations were recognized for their peacemaking role in global politics and internal political life of the country and society, their contribution to the maintenance of universal values. // Information of the Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR for the Kazakh SSR T.E. Sauranbekov to the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR about the meeting of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the KazSSR N.A. Nazarbayev with religious figures of the republic (Information of Suranbekov). // Russian Perspectives on Islam, accessed March 11, 2025. By 1989 in Kazakhstan there were 47 Muslim religious associations, about 700 registered ministers of religion and more than 1000 illegal mullahs. There are applications to open new mosques.

**Conclusion**

Anti-religious policies in the Kazakh SSR were integral part of the general politics across the USSR, and undergone several stages – from compromises in early 1920s through reprisals of 1930–1940s, and moderate stance since the war times to strict control until perestroika times. Despite the state-run institutes, legislature, propaganda anti-clerical policies were not effective. The communism buildup process was slowed down because of the population religiosity and adherence to religious practices. Administrative and ideological pressure, atheistic propaganda could not achieve the set objectives. Although, the population could not publicly express their religiosity, they hid it inside the communities, and observe the fundamental practices name giving, circumcision, funeral, commemorations, life cycle rituals, observance of prayers and fasting and in some ethnic groups – strong endogamous practices (Karklins, 1980). The survey of late 1980s in the Kazakh SSR revealed high religiosity level, between 20 and 70% of those surveyed identified as believers and sympathizers (Religioznye ob'edinenia v Kazahstane: 11).

**Sources**

AP RK — Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
CSA RK — Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
RGANI — Russian State Archive of Contemporary History

**Источники**

АП РК — Архив Президента Республики Казахстан  
РГАНИ — Российский государственный архив новейшей истории  
ЦГА РК — Центральный государственный архив Республики Казахстан

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