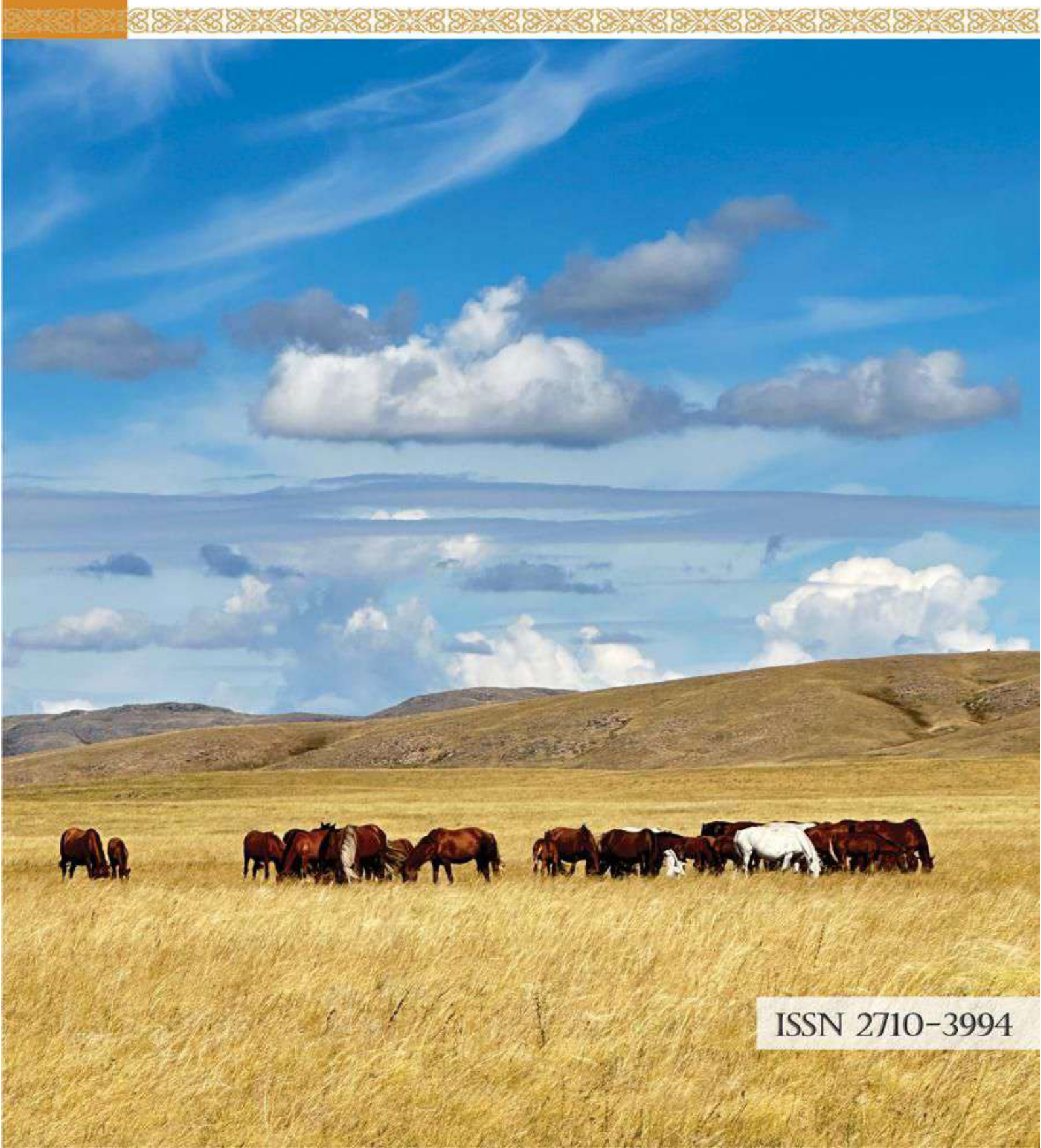


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REPRESSED MUSLIM CLERGY IN SOUTH KAZAKHSTAN (1920s–1940s)

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Abstract. *Introduction.* This study is devoted to the repressions against the Muslim clergy of Southern Kazakhstan in the 1920–1940s, i.e. the period that left a deep mark on the history of the region. The object of the study covers the general picture of political repressions in the USSR, with an emphasis on the features of Southern Kazakhstan as a historically important center of Islamic culture and spirituality. The relevance of the topic is due to the modern policy of historical justice, in particular the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K.-Zh.K. Tokayev dated November 24, 2020 “On the establishment of a state commission on the rehabilitation of victims of political repression”, which gave impetus to a comprehensive study and reassessment of the repressive policy against the Muslim clergy. In the context of increased interest in issues of religious identity and historical memory, the relevance of the topic increases many times over. *Goals and objectives* of this study are to analyze and summarize the policy of repression against Muslim religious leaders of Southern Kazakhstan, using retrospective and content analysis of archival materials. The objectives also include: identifying the forms and methods of the Soviet government's struggle against the Islamic clergy; analyzing falsifications by investigative bodies and political accusations against ishans, imams, and hafiz; assessing the impact of repression on the destruction of religious structures and the transformation of religious identity; comparing archival data with modern scientific interpretation. The materials and methods of the study are based on sources from the Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan, NKVD interrogation protocols, indictments, and office documents. The methodological base includes content analysis, comparative historical method, elements of narrative reconstruction, and principles of historical source criticism. The scientific novelty lies in the localized focus on Southern Kazakhstan as a unique space for interaction between religion and the repressive apparatus. Based on little-studied archival materials, the image of the repressed Muslim clergy as a subject of historical memory and cultural resistance is systematically reconstructed for the first time. *Results.* In Southern Kazakhstan, the fates of religious figures under

Soviet repression have been comprehensively reassessed on the basis of newly uncovered archival sources. This has enabled a clearer understanding of their role in preserving the people’s historical consciousness and strengthening their spiritual resilience. *Conclusion.* The study emphasizes the need to continue archival and field research, integrate spiritual heritage issues into educational and memorial programs, and expand the scholarly dialogue on the role of the Muslim elite in preserving the cultural identity of the Kazakh people under totalitarian pressure.

Keywords: Political repressions, Muslim clergy, Southern Kazakhstan, Soviet authorities, secularization, national identity, archival materials, religious traditions, NKVD

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ОҢТҮСТІК ҚАЗАҚСТАН ӨНІРІНЕН РЕПРЕССИЯҒА ҰШЫРАҒАН МҰСЫЛМАН ДІНБАСЫЛАРЫ (1920–1940 ЖЖ.)

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Аңдатпа. *Kіріспе.* Бұл зерттеу 1920–1940-жылдары Оңтүстік Қазақстан өңірінен мұсылман дінбасыларына қарсы жүргізілген қуғын-сүргін саясатына арналған. Бүгінде Қазақстанда тарихи әділеттілікті қалпына келтіруге бағытталған мемлекеттік саясатпен, атап айтқанда, ҚР Президенті Қ.-Ж.К. Тоқаевтың 2020 жылғы 24 қарашадағы «Саяси қуғын-сүргін құрбандарын ақтау мәселелері жөніндегі мемлекеттік комиссия құру туралы» Жарлығымен тікелей байланысты. Бұл құжат мұсылман дінбасыларына қатысты репрессиялық саясатты жан-жақты қайта зерттеуге және бағалауға жол ашты. Діни бірегейлік пен тарихи сана мәселелеріне деген қызығушылықтың артуы тақырыптың өзектілігін күшейтіп отыр. *Зерттеудің мақсаты мен міндеттері* – Оңтүстік Қазақстандағы мұсылман дінбасыларына қарсы кеңестік қуғын-сүргін саясатын мұрағат деректеріне сүйене отырып талдау және жүйелеу болып табылады. Мұсылман дінбасыларына қарсы жүргізілген саясатта кеңес өкіметі қолданған идеологиялық тәсілдер мен әдістерді анықтау; ишандар, имамдар, хафиздерге тағылған саяси айыптар мен тергеу органдары тарапынан жасалған бұрмалауларды талдау; репрессиялардың діни құрылымдардың күйреуіне және діни бірегейліктің трансформациясына әсерін бағалау; мұрағат материалдарды қазіргі ғылыми интерпретациямен салыстыру. *Нәтижелер.* Оңтүстік Қазақстанда кеңестік қуғын-сүргін мен дін қайраткерлерінің тағдыры жаңа дерек көздері арқылы қайта қаралды. Бұл олардың халықтың тарихи санасын сақтауға және рухани беріктігін арттыруға қосқан үлесін айқындады. *Қорытынды.* Мұсылман діни элитасына бағытталған репрессиялар діни білім иелерін құрбан етуге емес, сонымен бірге ислам дәстүрінің институционалдық негізін күйретуге бағытталғанын көрсетеді. Бұл саясат өңірдің діни мәдениетіне елеулі өзгерістер енгізіп, рухани тәжірибелердің маргиналдануына және халық жадының бұрмалануына әкелді.

Түйін сөздер: Саяси қуғын-сүргін, мұсылман дінбасылары, Оңтүстік Қазақстан, кеңестік билік, секуляризация, ұлттық бірегейлік, мұрағат материалдары, діни дәстүрлер, НКВД
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РЕПРЕССИРОВАННОЕ МУСУЛЬМАНСКОЕ ДУХОВЕНСТВО ЮЖНОГО КАЗАХСТАНА 1920–1940-Х ГОДОВ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Настоящее исследование посвящено репрессиям в отношении мусульманского духовенства Южного Казахстана в 1920–1940-х годах, т.е. периоду, оставившему глубокий след в истории региона. Объект исследования охватывает общую картину политических репрессий в СССР, с акцентом на особенности Южного Казахстана как исторически важного центра исламской культуры и духовности. *Актуальность* темы обусловлена современной политикой исторической справедливости, в частности Указом Президента Республики Казахстан К.-Ж.К. Токаева от 24 ноября 2020 года «О создании государственной комиссии по вопросу о реабилитации жертв политических репрессий», который дал импульс к комплексному изучению и переоценке репрессивной политики в отношении мусульманского духовенства. В условиях усиленного интереса к вопросам религиозной идентичности и исторической памяти актуальность темы многократно возрастает. *Цель и задачи* данного исследования – проанализировать и обобщить политику репрессий в отношении мусульманских религиозных лидеров Южного Казахстана, используя ретроспективный и контент-анализ архивных материалов. Задачи также включают: выявление форм и методов борьбы советской власти против исламского духовенства; анализ фальсификаций следственных органов и политических обвинений в адрес ишанов, имамов, хафизов; оценку влияния репрессий на разрушение религиозных структур и трансформацию религиозной идентичности; сопоставление архивных данных с современной научной интерпретацией. Материалы и методы исследования основаны на источниках Центрального государственного архива Республики Казахстан, протоколах допросов НКВД, обвинительных заключениях и делопроизводственных документах. Методологическая база включает контент-анализ, сравнительно-исторический метод, элементы нарративной реконструкции, а также принципы исторической источниковедческой критики. Научная новизна заключается в локализованном фокусе на Южный Казахстан как уникальное пространство взаимодействия религии и репрессивного аппарата. На основе малоизученных архивных материалов впервые системно реконструируется образ репрессированного мусульманского духовенства как субъекта исторической памяти и культурного сопротивления. *Результаты.* В Южном

Казахстане судьбы религиозных деятелей в контексте советских репрессий подверглись комплексному переосмыслению на основе вновь выявленных источников. Это позволило выявить их роль в сохранении исторического самосознания народа и укреплении его духовной устойчивости. *Заключение* подчеркивает необходимость продолжения архивных и полевых исследований, интеграции вопросов духовного наследия в образовательные и мемориальные программы, а также расширения научного диалога о роли мусульманской элиты в сохранении культурной идентичности казахского народа в условиях тоталитарного давления.

Ключевые слова: Политические репрессии, мусульманское духовенство, Южный Казахстан, советская власть, секуляризация, национальная идентичность, архивные материалы, религиозные традиции, НКВД

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Introduction

The political repressions carried out by Stalin’s regime during the 1930s and 1940s, commonly referred to in the literature as the “*Great Terror*” remain one of the most tragic and destructive episodes in the modern history of Kazakhstan. The deliberate and systematic deployment of the Soviet repressive apparatus across the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic resulted in mass persecution, arbitrary arrests, executions, and forced deportations. Thousands of individuals were executed on fabricated charges of counterrevolutionary activity, while their families faced criminal prosecution, involuntary relocation, and confinement in the Gulag system. Archival sources and demographic studies indicate that famine in the 1920s and 1930s combined with the repressions of 1937s and 1938s reduced the ethnic Kazakh population by approximately two million persons, and a further one million sought refuge in neighboring states such as China and Turkey, often following perilous routes that included passages through the Himalayas. These events produced severe socioeconomic dislocations and lasting demographic shifts that are still evident in Kazakhstan today (Koygeldiyev, Polulyah, Tleubayev 2013: 384).

Between 1930 and 1953 the Soviet government established eleven forced labor camps on Kazakh territory, tangible expressions of the state policy of repression. These camps were notorious for brutal conditions and functioned as mechanisms of coercion and violence, aimed at breaking prisoners’ physical endurance, dignity, and psychological stability.

The repression of the 1930s and 1940s is a critical point of departure for understanding Kazakhstan’s social and political transformations under Soviet rule. Totalitarian practices undermined national identity, dismantled religious institutions, and eroded cultural traditions. The systematic elimination of intellectual and spiritual elites disrupted the social fabric and created enduring obstacles to the recovery of historical memory in the post Soviet period. A decisive step toward rectifying this legacy was taken on 14 April 1993, when the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted the law “*On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions*” which laid a legal foundation for restoring justice and strengthening the cultural and historical identity of independent Kazakhstan (Reabilitatsiya zhertv massovyh politicheskikh represii, Zakon Respubliki Kazahstan ot 14 aprelya 1993 goda).

Established in 2020, the State Commission for the Full Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions now works across eleven thematic fields that encompass former rural elites, refugees, victims of collectivization and grain requisitioning, participants in uprisings, the intelligentsia, activists of the Alash movement, religious figures, deported ethnic minorities, and special settlers. Particular attention is devoted to the persecution of Muslim clergy during the Great Terror, when the authorities routinely invoked article 58 paragraph 10 and article 58 paragraph 11 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, which criminalized counterrevolutionary propaganda and organized counterrevolutionary activity. These measures destroyed traditional spiritual institutions that had long underpinned Kazakh cultural identity (Koygeldiyev 2009: 448).

Muslim clerics were also accused of forming nationalist organizations, collaborating with foreign intelligence, and disseminating ideas identified as pan Islamic or pan Turkic. Mass prosecutions bore codenames such as "*The Clergy*" in southern Kazakhstan in 1937, "*The Churchmen*" in Kokshetau, "*The Worshipers*" targeting Polish Catholics, "*The Dissatisfied*" against Baptists, and the large "*Quran Chain*" case of 1940. These campaigns served to dismantle religious institutions and suppress the spiritual identity of the Kazakh population (Romanenko, 2005: 44–62).

Although cases classified in the first category led to widespread executions, the number of death sentences began to decline by 1940, even as long prison terms continued. Repressive activity rose once more during the Great Patriotic War, despite a nominal relaxation of state policy toward religious institutions. Newly declassified NKVD files reveal a quota system for arrests and executions that local officials often exceeded on their own initiative (Hristoforov, 2010: 69–75).

In 1938, following secret NKVD Order 00447, security forces in southern Kazakhstan uncovered what they described as an anti Soviet nationalist network that promoted Islamic and Turkic nationalism across the southern, Akmolinsk, Almaty, and western regions. The network consisted mainly of clergy, including mullahs and ishans, along with semi feudal elites such as bais and biis. Authorities arrested 1 363 individuals, of whom 829 received death sentences under first category charges. A related purge known as the "*Quran Chain*" case in 1940 again targeted Muslim clergy and nationalist activists, illustrating the Soviet strategy of suppressing religious and cultural identity through ideological control (CSA RK. F. 45., In. 1., C. 87., Sh. 7–8).

In 1990, investigators discovered several mass burial pits on the former outskirts of Shymkent, now incorporated into the city and marked by a memorial plaque. Testimony from long time residents suggests that the site served as an execution ground, underscoring the need for further systematic research into its connection with Stalinist repression.

The present study offers a comprehensive examination of Soviet policies toward the Muslim clergy of southern Kazakhstan from the 1920s to the 1940s. It analyzes fabricated espionage accusations and official portrayals of pan Islamic and pan Turkic ideas as existential threats that justified purging the Muslim elite. Employing a historical materialist framework, the study interprets ideological conflict and state violence as instruments of governance and uses content analysis of investigative records to trace shifts in religious self perception under repressive conditions.

Three developments render this investigation particularly timely. The State Commission's work has expanded access to new archival collections, especially those concerning clerical persecution in the south. Increased availability of Soviet records enables scholars to move beyond isolated incidents and chart systemic suppression of religious and national traditions. Contemporary debates on pan Islamism and pan Turkism in post Soviet societies further highlight the importance of understanding how these ideologies were once criminalized.

Core analytical concepts include repressive state policy, political purge, pan Islamism, pan Turkism, national identity, and religious freedom. Repressive policy is defined as state authorized action such as mass arrests, forced confessions, and executions intended to neutralize perceived political threats. Situating pan Islamism and pan Turkism in the context of southern Kazakhstan reveals both the structural logic of Soviet repression and its enduring influence on the region's social fabric, thereby enriching our understanding of the historical forces that shaped contemporary Kazakh cultural and religious identity.

Materials and Methods

The study draws upon a comprehensive analysis of archival records, including documents housed in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These records comprise investigative files and interrogation transcripts prepared by the NKVD, specifically addressing the suppression of Muslim clergy in Southern Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the research incorporates an extensive array of journalistic and scholarly sources that illuminate the nuances of Soviet repressive policies and their profound impact on the religious and cultural dimensions of the region's Muslim population. Particular emphasis is placed on personal accounts, memoirs of those persecuted,

and documents that provide a contextual understanding of the socio-political landscape of Kazakhstan during the 1920s–1940s.

The theoretical framework of this study is enriched by an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on contributions from both national and international scholars. Notably, the works of Turkish academics, such as Ahmed Karamahmet, offer invaluable insights into Pan-Islamist ideology and its role in the targeted repression of Muslim clergy. These studies reveal the Soviet regime’s strategic framing of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism as existential ideological threats, necessitating their systematic eradication. Through this lens, the research explores how these perceptions were instrumentalized to justify extensive measures of suppression (Karametz, 2010: 122–130). The studies conducted by scholars such as Mehmet Şahin and Halil Erdem offer critical insights into the broader ideological struggles in Central Asia and their impact on religious practices. These works also highlight how repressive measures were systematically employed to suppress Islamic identity within the Soviet Union (Şahin, 2015: 185–196; Erdem, 2018: 214–223).

The research methodology integrates historical-archival investigation, source-based content analysis, and comparative studies of published materials on repressive practices across various regions of the Soviet Union. Employing content analysis has facilitated the deconstruction of core mechanisms underpinning ideological suppression of religious freedom and enabled a comparative examination of repressive policies in Soviet Kazakhstan versus other parts of the former USSR.

The theoretical foundation of the study is anchored in frameworks of political repression, ideological governance, and the construction of national identity as articulated in Western historical and sociological scholarship. A pivotal aspect of the analysis involves leveraging the theory of ideological repression, articulated by Western academics such as John Lewis and Michael Scott. In his seminal work, *The Politics of Repression*, Lewis argues that political repression serves as a cornerstone of state strategies to consolidate power and neutralize perceived threats to regime stability. He underscores that, within autocratic systems, the suppression of intellectual and religious entities functions not merely as a tool to dismantle political dissent but as an integral component of cultural warfare aimed at obliterating alternative identities and preserving hegemonic state narratives (Lewis, 1991: 68–70).

Michael Scott, in his study *Repressive Ideologies and Nationalism*, examines how authoritarian regimes employ ideological frameworks to construct and sustain a homogenized national identity. He emphasizes that ideology often serves as the foundational rationale for orchestrating large-scale repressive measures against religious and ethnic minorities, which are frequently perceived as existential threats to state security (Scott, 1994: 157–160). This perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing Soviet policies toward the Muslim clergy in South Kazakhstan, which was perceived as part of a broader Muslim identity threatening Soviet hegemony.

Anthony Smith's concept of national identity provides valuable insight into why Soviet authorities regarded the Muslim clergy as a potential threat. In his work *National Identity and the Politics of History*, Smith argues that national identity is constructed not only on ethnic and cultural markers but also on ideological foundations often employed to legitimize repressive practices. This framework is applicable to understanding Soviet strategies aimed at suppressing the national and religious identities of Kazakh and other Central Asian populations (Smith, 1991: 204–209).

An important contribution to understanding political repression within the context of global repressive processes is found in the work of historians like David Reifer, particularly in his book *Soviet Repressions and the Politics of Memory*. Reifer examines how repression in the Soviet Union was part of a broader system of totalitarian control and how it played a significant role in shaping collective memory around trauma and loss. His work delves into the impact of these repressive processes on national communities and cultural institutions, including religious communities, which were central to social identity in the former Soviet states (Reifer, 2003: 118–120).

The topic of political repressions has been extensively examined in national historiography, with particular emphasis on the conceptual framework developed by historian M.K. Koygeldiyev. His theory is grounded in national principles and interprets repressions as a deliberate tool for dismantling the Kazakh political and spiritual elite, aimed at eradicating elements of national identity.

M.K. Koygeldiyev emphasizes that the Soviet regime systematically targeted bearers of traditional knowledge, including the Muslim clergy, in order to undermine the foundations of national self-consciousness. In his works, repressions are not viewed as incidental campaigns, but rather as an integral part of colonial policy designed to suppress any manifestation of autonomy or resistance within Kazakh society (Koygeldiyev, 2009).

The methodology of the research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating historical, sociological, and cultural analysis. The application of historical analysis enables the reconstruction of the chronological sequence of events related to political repressions, as well as the identification of patterns in their implementation, drawing on archival materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Special attention is given to the study of interrogation protocols, orders, and other documents, which allows for the reconstruction of key aspects of the ideological policies of the Soviet state.

Sociological analysis provides the framework for examining the impact of repressions on the social structure of society, including the Muslim clergy, and studying the transformation of identity and collective memory under the influence of repressive practices. A crucial element of the methodology is comparative analysis, which allows for the juxtaposition of domestic archival data with the findings of international scholars, to identify similarities and differences in the repressive practices of the USSR and other authoritarian regimes. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of political repression and their interrelation with processes of national and social control.

The use of quantitative analysis of archival materials, such as data on the number of individuals convicted, their socio-professional affiliations, and the charges brought against them, enables conclusions to be drawn about the scale and systematic nature of the repressions. Groups of cases, including those involving Muslim clergy, are also analyzed with attention to their political and ideological interpretations, thus ensuring an integration of micro- and macro-level perspectives in the study. The methodological foundation is further complemented by the use of cultural analysis, which helps to reveal how repressions transformed cultural codes and religious practices. This is particularly important for understanding the long-term consequences of these processes for the Muslim community of Southern Kazakhstan.

Discussion

As indicated in the archival report titled *"On the Progress of Agent-Operational and Investigative Work Against the Muslim Clergy of Kazakhstan and Central Asia"* the theoretical and methodological aspects of this issue remain insufficiently explored. Many documents are either distorted or incomplete, complicating a comprehensive understanding of the repressive policies of the time. To address this gap, content analysis was employed to examine the materials related to those convicted, offering a more nuanced perspective on the broader context of this repressive campaign.

As early as 1998, the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan published a collection of archival materials dedicated to the political repressions carried out in Kazakhstan during 1937–1938. This publication presents documents that reveal the scale of the repressions, the administrative mechanisms used to implement them, and the ways in which the totalitarian regime exerted ideological pressure on public consciousness. Although the collection covers a broad range of repressive practices, in the context of this article it is used exclusively as a source for analyzing the extent of the persecutions and the methods employed. Given that the focus of this study is specifically on Islamic religious figures, the documents from the collection were consulted selectively, with the aim of understanding the general context of mass repression and the administrative strategies that may have been applied to members of the Muslim clergy (Politicheskii repressii, 1998).

In an effort to restore historical justice and acknowledge the suffering endured during the period of totalitarian rule, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Kemelevich Tokayev signed the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan *"On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Mass Political Repressions"* (as amended as of June 8, 2024). Under this law, rehabilitation is defined as the official

recognition through judicial or other legally established procedures of an individual as a victim or survivor of political repression, with the subsequent restoration of their violated rights and compensation for moral and/or material damages. As part of the implementation of Presidential Decree No. 456 dated November 24, 2020, "On the State Commission for the Full Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions" regional commissions were established and actively conducted research in local archives. As a result of their work, in 2025 the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan published a new volume of archival documents, containing previously inaccessible materials that offer deeper insights into the scale, methods, and targets of the repressions, including those directed against Islamic religious figures.

According to archival documents from June 20, 1940, various agent-based cases in Kazakhstan were consolidated due to the merging of several prior operational developments within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the South Kazakhstan region. This consolidation allowed for a more comprehensive analysis and led to the identification of key figures behind the underground movements with Islamic and Turkic nationalist ideologies, as well as their networks. The investigation conducted a thorough review of the materials, which not only confirmed the previously gathered information but also uncovered additional evidence concerning the activities of these groups. A significant turning point in the investigation came with the detention of an individual involved in the "Tabyn" operation, a representative of the Junior Zhuz of the Kazakh people. During his interrogation, he provided detailed testimony about the organization's structure, its connections, the nature of its activities, the leadership, and his own involvement. His account, alongside other collected materials, largely validated the intelligence gathered through agent-based sources. This approach enabled the investigation to gain a more profound understanding of the planned uprisings, which were perceived as direct challenges to Soviet control in the region (CSA RK., F. 342., Inv. 1., C. 702., P. 2).

The research and methodological framework for analyzing the accused was thoroughly developed by M. Koygeldiyev, who astutely identified the years 1937–1938 as the pinnacle of repressive activities in Kazakhstan. He pointed out that the "case of the pan-Islamist insurgent espionage and sabotage organization" based in Tashkent and operating in Southern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was a key element in the ideological narrative constructed by the investigative authorities. According to the NKVD officers' perspective, this organization was seen as a central hub for the entire Central Asian region, and its exposure became a pivotal moment for initiating an extensive and multi-layered intelligence operation.

Significantly, the materials related to Southern Kazakhstan served as the basis for the high-profile "Qoran Chain" case, which united the republics of Central Asia and the RSFSR under a single repressive framework. This consolidation reflects the systematic application of repressive tactics aimed at subjugating the Muslim clergy and national intelligentsia. Historical analysis reveals that the repressive measures that began in Southern Kazakhstan in 1937–1938 were catalysts for the broader wave of political repression that culminated in 1940.

Investigation Case No. 035, as outlined in the official indictment, demonstrates the complexity of the charges: "In June 1940, NKVD authorities of the Kazakh SSR identified and swiftly dismantled active insurgent pan-Islamist organizations in Southern Kazakhstan, Aktyubinsk, and Guriev regions, led and coordinated by leaders of the Basmachi insurgent movement and pan-Islamist figures-agents of Japanese and Turkish intelligence". This document underscores how ideologically-driven interpretations of geopolitical threats informed the methodological and operational strategies used to target Muslim clerics, who were systematically categorized as foreign intelligence operatives (Shamsutdinov, 2012: 73–75).

The theoretical and methodological foundation of this research is informed by the approach developed by Mambet Koygeldiyev, who, through a comprehensive analysis of archival materials, meticulously identified and substantiated the facts surrounding the repression and subsequent executions of the *ishans* in the South Kazakhstan region. This approach integrates the reconstruction of historical realities through the critical examination of primary sources such as investigative files, interrogation records, and operational documents. Koygeldiyev's methodology combines content

analysis with the theoretical interpretation of the ideological and political processes that prompted the repressive actions.

A particular focus is placed on examining the role of the ishans as key figures of religious identity and traditional Islamic institutions, which were central to the social fabric of the region but simultaneously targeted by the Soviet state's suppression policies. In this context, repression is seen not only as a means of dismantling the religious elite but also as an effort to assert control over the population by eliminating traditional cultural and spiritual authorities. M.K. Koygeldiyev's methodology facilitates the identification of systemic patterns in the repressive actions, highlighting their relationship with the broader global shifts in Soviet policies during the 1930s and their impact on South Kazakhstan within the overarching narrative of Soviet repression of Muslim clergy.

Political repression in Kazakhstan reached its zenith in the 1930s and 1940s, evolving into a comprehensive and systematic campaign, particularly under the implementation of the "*Minor October*" program. This program, which sought to dismantle traditional social structures, became a driving force for large-scale repressive measures aimed at eliminating religious and cultural institutions. These measures included the confiscation of religious buildings, such as mosques, temples, and synagogues; the physical elimination and imprisonment of clerical figures; the withdrawal of state registration from religious organizations; the closure of religious institutions and publications; and stringent controls on religious practices, effectively criminalizing them outside of designated religious spaces.

South Kazakhstan stands out as one of the critical regions where the scale of repression reached its most extreme. Archival data reveals that between 1928 and 1933, 198 mosques were shut down. By 1929, 2, 469 ishans had been arrested and subjected to forced labor. In the subsequent years, specifically in 1931–1932, approximately 1,153 Muslim clerics were criminally charged. In 1940, as part of broader efforts to suppress religious activity, 355 ishans were incarcerated in the Karlag labor camp, accompanied by repressive actions against their families and other mosque personnel (Sovetskaya derevnya glazami OGPU-NKVD, Tom 2, 1923–1929, Dokumenty i materialy, 2000: 1018).

The analysis of available archival records and data leads to several key scholarly conclusions. First, the repressions targeting the Muslim clergy in Southern Kazakhstan were not merely tools for suppressing religious practices but were part of a broader strategy of ideological control aimed at dismantling the cultural foundations of national identity. Second, the confiscation of religious property and the mass arrests of clergy were accompanied by a deliberate cultivation of a climate of fear within society, which effectively reduced social engagement and resistance. Third, the methods of repression involved the use of fabricated charges, such as espionage or participation in Islamist and Turkist movements, reflecting the Soviet regime's efforts to justify its actions on the international stage. Moreover, it is important to note that the repressive measures of the 1930s laid the groundwork for the long-term suppression of religious activity in the region. Studies indicate that the effects of these processes were still felt in the postwar period, as religious institutions continued to be under strict state control.

Results

Researchers Burkit Ayagan and Sabyr Kasymov rightly emphasize that the data regarding the victims of political repression among the traditional clergy in Kazakhstan was systematically destroyed or distorted, complicating the accurate assessment of the extent of Soviet repressive policies. A significant portion of the archival materials remains classified, inaccessible to research, and religious leaders were often falsely accused not only of defending religious values but also of fabricated crimes such as anti-state activities or espionage. This presents a major challenge in reconstructing the historical reality and understanding the full scope and character of the repression. Consequently, it is imperative for the State Commission, academic institutions, and the broader public to engage in a thorough examination of this category of victims, analyzing both declassified and still-secret archival records. This approach will enable the development of concrete measures for the complete political and legal rehabilitation of the unjustly convicted. Only through methodical, scientifically grounded research can

we restore historical justice and shed light on one of the darkest chapters of the Soviet era (Ayagan, Kasymov, 2022: 35–44).

In the course of advancing an operational version that posited the existence of an underground counterrevolutionary center in Central Asia and Kazakhstan with pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic orientations, officers of the State Security Directorate concentrated their efforts on four ishans from Southern Kazakhstan: Sıdyk Hanseitov, Yusupkhane Umarturyaev, Gulturkhan Ishankhanov, and Alken Jangirkhodjaev. These individuals were likely targeted for two principal reasons. First, they commanded significant spiritual and social authority within their local Muslim communities. Second, they maintained connections with prominent Muslim clerics who had emigrated abroad. As part of an operation launched by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, all four were arrested as alleged participants in a pan-Islamic underground network. Sıdyk Ishan Hanseitov was arrested on May 31, 1937; Yusupkhane Umarturyaev on June 16; Gulturkhan Ishan Ishankhanov on September 1; and Alken Ishan Jangirkhodjaev on October 9 of the same year. Although the investigation proceeded along a clearly defined ideological trajectory, the transfer of the cases to the Special Troika was repeatedly delayed, which may indicate a lack of sufficient evidence to substantiate the proposed theory. The extension of the investigation was officially sanctioned by the Central Executive Committee of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, highlighting the deep entanglement of administrative authority and ideological enforcement in the machinery of political repression (CSA RK. F. 251., Inv. 1., C. 1342., P. 97–98).

According to the interrogation protocol, Sıdyk-İshan is reported to have initiated the formation of a counter-revolutionary Islamic insurgent organization in Kazakhstan under the directive of an individual from the city of Sham Shami-Khazret (with Shami-Khazret being a pseudonym and the true identity remaining unknown). Notably, among those he is alleged to have recruited into the anti-Soviet movement in 1925 were Alken-İshan Jangirkhodjaev and Aleyutdin-İshan Appak. Simultaneously, Yusupkhane-İshan Umarturyaev, whose activities were supposedly monitored from abroad, particularly by Mubaşirhan-İshan Seydekanov, an émigré from Dzhambul to Afghanistan, also became involved in the organization. The intermediary function connecting the domestic Islamic and Turkic nationalist organization in Kazakhstan to its foreign hub was reportedly fulfilled by either an Afghan or an Iranian individual named Azhi Mesrik. This complex network underscores the transnational character of the movement and highlights the intricate interplay of ideological, religious, and geopolitical influences shaping the counter-revolutionary activities in the region during this period (CSA RK. F. 34., Inv. 2., C. 786., P. 15). This episode illustrates how the Soviet repressive apparatus utilized accusations of Islamic and Turkic nationalism to legitimize political persecution. The creation of fictitious "counter-revolutionary" organizations, even if they existed only on paper, played a pivotal role in justifying mass arrests and the elimination of religious and national elites. From a methodological perspective, it is important to emphasize that totalitarian regimes employ myth-making and the construction of the "*enemy of the people*" archetype as a means of interpreting events through narratives of conspiracy and external interference. These narratives function as powerful instruments for consolidating political authority and suppressing potential public dissent.

However, there are clear discrepancies in the testimony of Sıdyk-İshan. In interrogation protocols dated September 28 and October 1, 1937, he claims that the formation of Islamic and Turkic nationalist organizations with a center in Tashkent dates back to 1930, linking them to the activities of the Muftizaba of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims, Abduvahit Kari. This information presents significant challenges for verification. For example, in 1930, a major gathering of the Muslim clergy took place in Mecca (Saudi Arabia), attended by delegates from countries with Muslim populations, including Abduvahit Kari from Uzbekistan, Magdyul Magdiyev and Akhmed Ishan from Kazakhstan, Tardzhimanov Kashaf from Tatarstan, and Abdurashid from Tajikistan. This fact requires additional contextual analysis and scholarly verification to assess the credibility of the data presented (CSA RK. F. 563., Inv. 2., C. 876., P. 3–4). The challenges of reconstructing historical realities in the context of Soviet political repression are evident in the interrogation protocols, which often reflect coercively constructed narratives rather than verifiable facts. These documents functioned as instruments for legitimizing state-sanctioned repression. At the core of this strategy

were fabricated narratives concerning international conspiracies and anti-Soviet networks, constructed to reinforce ideological control and suppress dissent within the population. The reliance on such exaggerated claims highlights the Soviet authorities' efforts to manufacture external threats as a means of consolidating internal control. The case materials, often riddled with inconsistencies and speculative assertions, underscore the methodological difficulty in separating historical truth from deliberate distortion.

Central to these accusations is the portrayal of Hazrat Ibn Saud, who was framed as both a Saudi religious leader and an operative for British intelligence. The investigators alleged his role in organizing a significant gathering in Mecca, which they claimed served as the foundation for orchestrated Islamic mobilization in Central Asia. Upon returning to Tashkent, Abduvahid Qari was accused of attempting to revive and merge the disbanded organizations Ulama Jamiati and Shura-i Islamiya into a unified Islamic entity. The supposed leadership of this organization reportedly included 19 prominent ishans, with members such as Umar-Turyaev Yusupkhan and Khanseitov Sydyk from Kazakhstan. These claims, however, lack credible corroboration and seem to be a product of investigative manipulation, with alleged connections to foreign actors designed to fabricate a cohesive narrative of subversion.

The contradictions in Sydyk Ishan's testimony, including inconsistencies in the timeline of the organization's foundation, point to the investigative authorities' propensity to invent details to support their narrative. Claims about the involvement of figures like Hazrat Ibn Saud and Shami-Hazrat were likely fictitious constructs aimed at bolstering accusations. The indictment further alleged that the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims engaged in intelligence activities for foreign powers and sought to overthrow Soviet governance to establish a unified Muslim state. The supposed dependence on military support from Turkey and other Islamic nations was another element of this propagandistic narrative. Such claims, while intended to justify the repression of Muslim clergy, reveal the extent of ideological fabrication employed to maintain the state's dominance and suppress dissent (Babarovski, 2007: 48–49). This passage underscores the significant methodological flaws in the investigative practices of Soviet repressive institutions, which frequently relied on speculative interpretations and fabricated narratives to substantiate their accusations. A key insight is that the charges levied against Muslim clergy were often grounded in tenuous and unsubstantiated claims of alleged international conspiracies and external threats. Such tactics served as instrumental mechanisms for legitimizing state persecution and consolidating ideological control over diverse populations.

The individuals implicated in this case, including Sydyk Hanseitov, Yusupkhan Umar Turyaev, Gulturekhan Ishanhanov, and Alken Dzhangirkhodzhayev, were accused of engaging in anti-Soviet activities across Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Specific allegations included organizing the Adai Uprising, conducting espionage on behalf of Turkish intelligence, and orchestrating an armed rebellion to establish an independent Muslim state. According to the investigative records, these initiatives were allegedly orchestrated under the direction of the Tashkent Muftiate and leaders such as Shami Khazret and Hazret Ibn Saud. However, a critical examination of the evidence reveals that the collaborative efforts among regional religious leaders were likely aimed at sustaining religious networks rather than pursuing subversive political objectives. Numerous inconsistencies and contradictions in the investigative records further indicate deliberate fabrications designed to construct the narrative of an internal enemy, a cornerstone of Soviet ideological policy.

The characterization of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims during the 1920s as engaged in Islamic revivalist and Turkic nationalist activities illustrates the broader attempts to delegitimize religious and cultural institutions. An analysis of archival documents from the Central Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan reveals the absence of coherent definitions for these terms within Soviet counterintelligence materials. A 1944 memorandum by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs titled "Islamic Revivalist and Turkic Nationalist Movements in Central Asia and Kazakhstan" presents a heavily biased interpretation. The document portrays Islamic revivalism as an aspiration to unify all Muslims under the defense of Islam, ostensibly with Turkey as the leading force in this effort. Such ideological constructs not only served as justification for state-led repression

but also reflected broader efforts to reshape historical narratives in alignment with Soviet political objectives (*Sovetskaya derevnya glazami OGPU-NKVD*, Tom 3, 1930–1931, *Dokumenty i materia*, 2000: 203–204). The portrayal of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism in NKVD documentation exemplifies a calculated deployment of ideologically loaded narratives aimed at legitimizing state repression against religious and sociopolitical movements. The framing of a so-called “Pan-Islamic menace” was less about addressing tangible threats and more about discrediting any forms of religious engagement or cross-regional connections perceived as undermining Soviet ideological dominance. The absence of precise definitions in official records underscores the nebulous and manipulative nature of these accusations, revealing them as instruments of control rather than evidence of actual subversion. This methodological vagueness erodes the credibility of investigative conclusions and casts significant doubt on the impartiality of the judicial processes that followed.

The orchestration of legal proceedings against alleged conspirators further illustrates the extensive and deliberate character of Soviet repression. A directive issued in September 1940 initiated the detention of 51 individuals, predominantly members of the Muslim clergy from southern Kazakhstan. Most detainees confessed under coercion, while plans were made to apprehend additional suspects. These proceedings, marked by sweeping arrests and fabricated evidence, were mechanisms for dismantling potential nodes of influence while manufacturing an external enemy narrative. By eliminating spaces for religious and cultural expression, this strategy consolidated state power, suppressing any capacity for collective resistance and reinforcing the central authority’s grip over societal structures (CSA RK. F. 141., Inv. 1., C. 1572., P. 4). The effort to gather materials for constructing a narrative about the existence of Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkic organizations essentially began with the establishment of Soviet rule in Central Asia and Kazakhstan, a period marked by the creation of local intelligence and counterintelligence agencies. According to archival records, between the 1920s and 1940s, numerous organizations in Kazakhstan and surrounding regions of Central Asia were actively oriented towards Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism, aiming to establish a unified Muslim state in opposition to Soviet governance. These groups were perceived as counterrevolutionary forces, posing a significant threat to the political stability of the republic. Documents from the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs suggest that these organizations comprised organized factions that actively resisted the processes of socialist modernization and collectivization, actions the authorities viewed as destabilizing to the region.

Additionally, a 1926 memorandum from the NKVD of the Kazakh SSR notes the clergy's agitational activities, which utilized religious unity to mobilize the peasantry around Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkic ideals. The authorities underscored that the local Muslim clergy’s resistance to Soviet power was bolstered by nationalist and anti-Soviet organizations, which exploited the religious sentiments of the population for political ends. According to the documents, these organizations sought to consolidate the Muslim masses in opposition to Soviet control, presenting a threat to both internal stability and the socio-political cohesion of the state. In response, Soviet security agencies intensified efforts to detect and neutralize these perceived threats, deploying intelligence and counterintelligence tactics to closely monitor the activities of religious leaders and representatives of national minorities (Grigoryev, 1984: 81). It is evident that analysts constructed all resistance phenomena to Soviet modernization within a unified framework of local elite opposition, thereby categorizing them as part of a broader global counterrevolutionary activity. This conceptualization allowed local movements to be framed as integral components of a wider anti-Soviet resistance context. In this regard, the situation of the accused was further complicated by their backgrounds, with four of the so-called organizers being bayis, or by their ties to prominent ishan families, which became influential factors in their inclusion in the circle of suspects. Among the so-called activists, there were not only two ishans but also six mullahs, which further heightened suspicions about their involvement in counterrevolutionary activities. As a result, all pan-Islamist cadres, the so-called murids, were automatically placed within the first circle of suspects, highlighting the rigidity and systemic nature of the approach used in identifying perceived threats.

When analyzing the fundamental perspectives of state security personnel on the Eastern question, one must recognize the presence of a differentiated approach to Muslims from various

regions of the country. A key factor considered in evaluating these categories of people was their willingness to undergo secularization, as well as their connections to relatively more modernized Muslim territories, such as Southern Kazakhstan and Tashkent, which were regarded as ideological and organizational centers of Soviet Islam. These circumstances played a pivotal role in shaping decisions regarding the perceived level of threat posed by individual religious figures and their respective organizations (Bakytov, 2022: 307).

A key question arises: What was the purpose behind the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in the South Kazakhstan region initiating the narrative of a counterrevolutionary pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist insurgent organization in the area? The answer to this question is multifaceted. First, it allowed the expansion of the scope of repression, involving ever more social groups and strata, aligning with the strategy of intensifying total political repression. Second, the creation and maintenance of such a narrative were crucial for simulating active efforts by the NKVD to identify counterrevolutionary elements, which not only served internal political mobilization but also bolstered the repressive apparatus as the central institution of power. The significance of the second aspect cannot be overstated, as it was during this period that the NKVD gained the status of an autonomous, all-powerful structure, suppressing any form of social activity, while the entire country effectively became a hostage to its unchecked authority.

Consequently, within the framework of the investigative case under review, the NKVD pursued a clearly defined objective to prove the existence of an organized counterrevolutionary core of a pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist organization with a center in Tashkent. However, as subsequent investigations revealed, the existence of such a center was not substantiated by any credible facts or documents. Nevertheless, the South Kazakhstan NKVD department did not halt its efforts. Without completing the investigation into the supposed leaders of this organization, four ishans, in August and September of the same year, it was decided to expand the investigation to include 15 counterrevolutionary cells allegedly discovered in districts of South Kazakhstan, which, according to the investigation, were established with the involvement of the same ishans and contained over 230 individuals (Teplyakov, 2013: 117).

Thus, this document, in alignment with the strategy formulated by the South Kazakhstan division of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, was intended to substantiate the claim of the existence of a counterrevolutionary pan-Islamist organization centered in Tashkent. In addition to its core structure, this organization was said to include a widespread network of insurgent cells operating in various districts, with ongoing expansion. It is noteworthy that nearly all individuals arrested in connection with this case were innocent. For example, Atybaev Babakul, detained as one of the alleged leaders of a counterrevolutionary cell in Suzak, stated in his testimony: "I, Atybaev, am not affiliated with any counterrevolutionary organization and have no knowledge of its existence. I have never engaged in anti-Soviet propaganda. I admit that I am a mulla and served as the imam of the Jailma mosque in the Sarysu district for several years, which indeed bears my name. I received my religious education at the Chayansky mosque under Appak-Ishan and studied for several years at the Baba-Ata mosque under Djangirkhodzhaev Alken-Ishan. I currently reside at the mosque, which is no longer operational" (CSA RK. F. 141., Inv. 1., C. 1567., P. 19).

Based on the analysis of the presented documents, it is evident that the methods employed by the NKVD to expand the scale of repression in South Kazakhstan were underpinned by weak evidence supporting accusations of counterrevolutionary activities. The primary tool of suppression was the concept of pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist organizations, which, according to official reports, were perceived as a widespread threat to Soviet power. However, the existence of such organizations, allegedly centrally managed from Tashkent, was never substantiated by reliable sources, indicating a strategy of manipulation and the creation of "fabricated" threats to justify repression. Arrests based on these versions often lacked factual grounding, revealing the absurdity of the charges and the insufficiency of evidence. Furthermore, the involvement of local religious leaders in these processes was often linked to their connections with prominent ishan families, which added a political dimension to the accusations. It is important to emphasize that the numerous confessions obtained from the accused were, in most cases, the result of coercion, as confirmed by the testimony of Babakul

Atybaev, who asserted his innocence. As a result, the actions of the NKVD not only led to unlawful repression but also deepened the socio-political rift between the state and local religious communities.

Conclusion

Political repression in the Soviet Union, an intrinsic feature of the Stalinist era, spanned from the 1920s to the early 1950s. However, the mechanisms of repression extended beyond Stalin's personal rule, continuing both before his ascent to power and after his death. The repressive legal framework of 1937–1938 emerged in a climate of widespread fear, fueled by the search for “enemies of the people” which became the pretext for mass repressions. The term “enemy of the people” was formally introduced by Stalin during a joint plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on January 7, 1933, marking a pivotal shift in Soviet political rhetoric. Alongside this, a new lexicon emerged within the punitive apparatus, with the term “coloring” being employed to categorize counterrevolutionary offenses within anti-Soviet activities. These offenses were classified into distinct categories such as nationalist, subversive, diversionary, and pan-Islamist crimes, reflecting the ideological priorities of the state. Political prisoners, including members of the Alash Orda, the Social Revolutionaries, and the Mensheviks, were subjected to a system of classification based on their political affiliations and perceived ideological loyalties.

The secret decrees and directives issued by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), most notably Orders No. 00447 (July 30, 1937) and No. 00486 (August 15, 1937), were instrumental in facilitating and institutionalizing mass repressions. These orders outlined a rigid classification system for the individuals targeted for repression, thereby enabling state authorities to manipulate the outcomes of investigative processes and execute mass arrests and executions with impunity. Order No. 00447 specifically called for the immediate arrest and execution of individuals deemed most “hostile” while those considered less active were subjected to prolonged imprisonment in forced labor camps. The subsequent expansion of the scope of repression through Order No. 00486 widened the category of targeted individuals, extending to not only members of nationalist and subversive organizations but also their families, reinforcing the totalitarian reach of the state apparatus. In the context of South Kazakhstan, a region rich in Muslim cultural heritage, these political purges played a significant role in the ideological and cultural reordering of society, leaving an enduring imprint on the historical trajectory of the region and its people. This process of repression was not merely a tool of political control but also a means of erasing or co-opting cultural and religious identities that were perceived as incompatible with the Soviet state's ideological vision.

Sources

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