

Khrushchev's Policies toward Religion: Repression in a Period of Reform

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Özet

Nikita Sergeyevech Kruşçev iktidarının en bilinen özelliği, Stalin'in politikalarına eleştirel yaklaşması ve Sovyet halkı üzerindeki baskıyı azaltmış olmasıdır. Stalin döneminde hapse, çalışma kampına ve sürgüne gönderilen pekçok kişinin bakları, Kruşçev döneminde iade edilmiştir. Ancak bu görece liberalleşme döneminde bir alan üzerindeki baskı azaltılmamıştır, o da dindir. Kruşçev'in dini inanışlara yönelik politikaları, en az kendisinden önceki Sovyet lideri Stalin'inkiler kadar baskıcı olmuştur. Bu makale, Kruşçev yönetiminin dine yönelik politikalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makalenin cevaplamaya çalıştığı araştırma sorusu şudur: Neden Kruşçev, diğer pekçok alanda halk üzerindeki baskıyı azalttığı halde dine yönelik baskıcı politikalar izlemiştir?

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sovyetler Birliği, Kruşçev, Din, İslam, Ortodoks Hıristiyanlık, Yabudilik, Baskı, Stalin.*

INTRODUCTION

Nikita Sergeyevech Khrushchev's rise to power in the first half of the 1950s has been regarded as the end of mass terrorism of Stalin years and beginning of relative liberalization in Soviet politics. He started the campaign of de-Stalinization and destroyed the Stalin cult. Millions of people who have suffered in labor camps, prisons, and exile were rehabilitated by him.¹

His policies can be considered as the Soviet form of populism which took into consideration at least to some degree the will and needs of people.² But in an era of this relative liberalization campaign, there has been one field that he

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¹ Roy Medvedev, *Khrushchev*, Anchor Press, Doubleday, New York, 1983, pp. VII-X.

² George W. Breslauer, "Khrushchev Reconsidered", in Stephen F. Cohen, Alexander Rabinowitch, Robert Sharlet, *The Soviet Union Since Stalin*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980, p. 50.

would not doubt to implement as repressive policies as his predecessor, if not more: religion. His policies as regards to religion have not been dealt with much in the literature and hidden among his other more popular policies.

This paper aims to examine religious policy of Khrushchev and try to find reasons for its implementation. The critical question to be asked here is this: Why did he implement Stalinist policies concerning religion, while turning things upside down in other areas to decrease tension and unpredictability?

RELIGIOUS POLICY DURING KHRUSHCHEV ERA

Karl Marx stated in an interview in 1878 the following: “We know that any forcible approach is useless against religion, but we think that religion will disappear in the world as socialism appears”.³ In opposition to what Marx envisions, in the Soviet case there was a sustained offensive against religion on a scale unprecedented in the history. Even if during some periods the regime found it to its interest to decrease pressure to gain the public support – for example during the Second World War - it has never been at ease with religious belief and tried to crush it by using every possible means: sending religious leaders uncompromising with the regime to labor camps, prisons and exile; ideological anti-religious propaganda; destroying or converting holy places to other buildings.

Even in the so-called most liberal area for the religion in the country between 1941-1957, direct and indirect persecutions did not totally cease. There was some wave of arrests of religious leaders who refused to cooperate with the regime.⁴

Just before Khrushchev took power entirely into his own hands, contradictory decisions were made by the Central Committee. July 1954 resolution stated that ever larger number of citizens were attending Church services and called on to intensify anti-religious propaganda. On the other hand resolution of November the same year criticized arbitrariness and use of slander against believers.

Between these two resolutions the country witnessed to ‘Hundred Days Campaign’, a violent persecution of religious activities similar to those in 1930s. But it was not clear whether these resolutions were initiated by Malenkov or Khrushchev.⁵ But it was for sure that even if Malenkov started the persecution, Khrushchev did not act against it.

³ Mark G. Field, “Religion and Soviet Society: A Sociologist’s Viewpoint”, *Studies on the Soviet Union*, IX/2 (1969).

⁴ Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *Soviet Anti-Religious Campaigns and Persecutions: A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer*, Vol. 2, St. Martin’s Press, New York 1988, p. 91-93.

⁵ Philip Walters, “A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy”, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 19.

The period between 1955-1958 constitute the most tolerant era after Second World War. Reopening of churches began, some new ones were built, and more students were admitted to theological seminars.

July 1954 resolution began to be implemented in 1959. The period between 1959-1964 became the years in which one of the most severe persecutions of religious belief was carried out. After the purge of anti-party group in 1957 and consolidation of premiership and party leadership in his hands in 1959, he began to strike the first severe blows against believers.

This renewed attack was confirmed in the official journal of Soviet Academy of Sciences, *Soviet Ethnography* as such: "The Party has never reconciled itself and never will, with ideological reaction of any kind... The struggle against religion must not only be continued, but it ought to be enhanced by all possible means."⁶

This must have come as a shock to all believers in the country. Khrushchev stated lots of times that he was a committed atheist. But at least public must have been expecting from him the continuation of tolerance. Both for the Soviet public and Soviet citizens and observers abroad who were fascinated by the fresh winds in the country, this was the very unexpected thing.⁷

It would be more appropriate to begin with Orthodox Christianity whose adherents constitute the majority among the population. At the end of 1958 Council of Ministers cancelled tax exemptions on monastic property introduced in 1945. Five of eight existing Orthodox seminaries were closed down and children under 18 were forbidden to attend church services. Between 1959-1964 the number of churches was reduced from 22,000 to 7,000. During the same period that of clergy was decreased from 30,000 to 6,000. The number of monasteries was made 17, from 69.⁸

In the Khrushchev era arbitrary arrests and persecutions were suspended to a considerable extent, concentration camps were mostly liquidated. But one special camp for members of clergy was kept intact in steppes near the Sea of Aral. Its prisoners included approximately 30,000 monks, nuns, and members of priesthood.

The beginning of the new anti-religious campaign was marked by the dismissal of Metropolitan Nicholas Yarushevich of Krutitsa (or Krutitsy). He did not cooperate in the crackdown and withdrew his support from the regime. Then in 1960 he was deprived of his post and died suddenly and mysteriously in 1962.⁹

⁶ Pospelovsky, op. cit., reference 4, p.122-128.

⁷ Ramet, op cit, reference 5, p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹ D. Konstantinov, "The Results of Soviet Persecution of the Orthodox Church", *bulletin*, May 1965, 12:5, p. 40 and pp. 45-46. See also Donald W. Treadgold, *20th Century Russia*, University of Washington, Westview Press, 1995, pp. 379-380.

Some tactics were used to close the churches. It was sometimes claimed that the building was required for other purposes, for example widening of a street, laying out a park etc. Sometimes the tax on church was increased monthly, then after a while the church could not pay it. That was also one of the reasons for closure.

Another method was the deprivation of priest of registration that was a document given by local authorities without which priest could not hold services. All religious organizations were forbidden to do charity or social work. That stroke a great blow to the financial resources of the church.

All rites like baptism, weddings, and funerals were permitted only on condition that those who attend must be registered. Then these people were subjected to reprisals and harassment.

Believers were visited by atheist agitators and 'persuaded' to abandon religion. 'Persuasion' was of course accompanied by violence and threats. Some people left their homes by force and disappeared.¹⁰

Another tactic was to conduct an intensive media campaign. In 1959 a special anti-religious journal began to be published called Science and Religion (NiR). Articles showing contempt and hatred for the believers appeared in this journal and also in many other atheistic and general press. Some of the titles in these publications were as such: 'The Vultures', 'Toadstools', 'Hordes', and 'Swindlers'.¹¹ There was also an effort to show clergy as deceitful and to prove that religion was used as a cover for anti-Soviet propaganda.¹² There were also some 'agent' bishops who were 'the eyes and ears of party surveillance'. Some political figures were appointed as bishops to keep church under party control.¹³

Islam was also treated harshly in this period. Muslims were the second largest group following Orthodoxy. At that time the number of Muslims was estimated around 45-50 million.¹⁴ During the rapprochement with Islam in the 1940's and early 1950's the intensity of anti-Islamic propaganda was reduced and Islam was given legal status by the creation of official Islamic administration, four Muslim Spiritual Directorates and Muslim higher school. After 30-year interruption, Muslims could go to pilgrimage, although in small numbers and only those loyal to the regime could get the permission.¹⁵ This

¹⁰ Konstantinov, op. cit., reference 9, pp. 41-46.

¹¹ Pospelovsky, op. cit., reference 4, pp. 98-101.

¹² K. Alexandrov, "Religion: Recent Anti-Religious Propaganda in the USSR", *bulletin*, Institute for the Study of USSR, June 1959, 6:6, p. 39.

¹³ Nadezhda Teodorovich, "The Rejuvenation of the Russian Orthodox Clergy", *Studies on the Soviet Union*, 1966, 5:4, pp. 38-39.

¹⁴ A. Kantemir, "İslamiyet ve Komünizm" (Islam and Communism), *dergi*, V/16 (1959), p. 3-15. Also see Mirza Bala, "Sovyetler Birliği'nde İslam Dinine Yeni Hücumlar" (New Attacks Against Islam in the Soviet Union), *dergi*, IV/13 (1958), p. 3-13.

¹⁵ Abdurrahman Kunta, "Sovyetler Birliği'nde Müslümanlığın Gerçek Durumu" (The Real Situation of Islam in the Soviet Union), *dergi*, X/35-36 (1964), p. 26-38.

period was ended by Khrushchev's uncompromisingly hostile attitude toward Islam.¹⁶ His attack on Islam had another significance, because it aimed to destroy national identity of Muslims and russify them.¹⁷

The attack on Islam began by ideological propaganda and persuasion attempts, then continued with closure of mosques and persecution. In 1956 Muslims were asked not to fast during Ramadan.¹⁸ It was argued in the Soviet press that Muslim prayers and 'bayrams' (religious holidays) gave considerable amount of harm to the economy by causing loss of time.

Islam was criticized 'scientifically' and claimed that socio-economic conditions of Arabs led to its emergence. It was argued that the pilgrimage was a source of profit for Arabs and it had no other meaning.¹⁹

Another tactic against Islam was deliberately made wrong translations of Koran, trying to show it supporting violence in human relations. Apart from that, Muslims' visits to scared tombs and holy places were made very difficult.²⁰ Mosques were closed once more. At the time of Stalin's death the number of mosques had been 1500, in early 1960s it was only 500.²¹

In some cases parents who let their children attend services or fast were prosecuted by the courts. According to Soviet press in 1962 a forester in Pskov Province, named Sokhraniaov was tried for allegedly forcing his two children to fast. He and his wife were deprived of parental rights and children were sent off to a boarding school.²²

The situation of Jews has been very different from Islam and Christianity, because they did not suffer only in post-Revolutionary period, but also in the pre-Revolutionary one. According to the 1959 census, their number was more than 2 million.

The Jewish question was a complex one, because Jews did not share only religion, but also they were a nation without a homeland. Unlike other religions they suffered also during the Second World War.²³

¹⁶ Alexandre Benningsen, Paul Henze, George K. Tanham and S. Enders Wimbush, *Soviet Strategy and Islam*, The Macmillan Press, 1989, pp. 26-30.

¹⁷ T. Davletsin, "Sovyet Rejimi Şartları Altında Sovyetler Birliği Müslümanlarının Elli Yıllık Hayatı" (Fifty Years of Muslims in the Soviet Union Under the Circumstances of the Soviet Regime), *dergi*, XII/46 (1966), p. 3. and Georg von Stackelberg, "The Tenacity of Islam in Soviet Central Asia", *Studies on the Soviet Union*, V/4 (1966).

¹⁸ Kantemir, op cit, reference 14, p.13.

¹⁹ Bala, op cit, reference 14, pp.12-13 and N. A. Teodoroviç, "Dine Karşı Sovyet Propagandası ve İslamiyet" (Soviet Propaganda Against Religion and Islam), *dergi*, XII/44 (1966), p. 27-35.

²⁰ N. A. Teodoroviç, "Sovyetler Birliği'nde İslam Dinine Karşı Yeni Kovalamacalar", (New Attacks on Islam in the Soviet Union), *dergi*, VIII/26-27 (1962), p. 61-74.

²¹ Benningsen, op. cit., reference 16, pp. 30-31.

²² Pospelovsky, op. cit., reference 4, p. 142.

²³ It is interesting that in spite of all this repression, the number of believers did not decrease, but increase in the country. In those years the Soviet press was reporting very often that Komsomol members continue to marry in Church, young party members have their children baptized. For

During Khrushchev years they also got their share from the persecution campaign. These people were left with only 60 active synagogues and a few old rabbis in the Khrushchev era.²⁴

When all this repression was going on inside the country, Khrushchev did try to create the image of existence of freedom for all kinds of religious activities abroad. Representatives were sent to both Islamic and Christian conferences all over the world. In fact these representatives were not real religious leaders, but Soviet propagandists. In this way Moscow was preventing the discussion about the situation of religion at home in these meetings.

For example in December 1964 World Islamic Conference convened in Somali. In the conference some delegations proposed discussion about the situation of the Muslims in the Soviet Union, but this attempt was prevented by Soviet representatives and this act was called as 'provocative'.²⁵ On the other hand the Russian Orthodox Church joined World Council of Churches in 1961 at the peak of anti-religious campaign. But no word was heard about the repression, other members did not say anything about this issue.²⁶

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR ATTACK ON RELIGION

First reason for attacking against all religious beliefs in the country may have been the increasing influence of religion during the tolerant years of Second World War and its aftermath. There were reports that the number of people attending the services and prayers has been increasing considerably and younger people came to be more interested in religion.

During the first years of Khrushchev in power there were reports in the Soviet press paying attention to this fact. The mood at that time was that the religion was tolerated more than enough and then it was time to go back to the repressive policies. Khrushchev thought that only a Stalinist campaign would give an end to the increasing popularity of the religion.²⁷

Second reason may be the need to preserve the very essentials of the Soviet system. Stalin's mass terror could be brought to an end or suspended for a while without giving any harm to the state. It might even be better to regain the trust of high level party officials and public. But anti-religious propaganda and persecutions serving to this end began after the Revolution and it was one of the basics of the Soviet system. That's why it should not have been given up

details, see K. Alexandrov, "Religion: Recent Anti-Religious Propaganda in the USSR", *bulletin*, VI/6 (June 1959), p. 38.

²⁴ Paul Mojzes, *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and USSR*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 87-92 and Hans Lamm, "Jews and Judaism in the Soviet Union", *Studies on the Soviet Union*, V/4 (1966).

²⁵ Teodorovic, op. cit., reference 20, pp. 29-30.

²⁶ Ramet, op. cit., reference 5, p. 23.

²⁷ Mojzes, op. cit., reference 24, p. 71 and D. Konstantinov, "The Results of Soviet Persecution of the Orthodox Church", *bulletin*, XII/5 (May 1965), p. 39.

easily. When it was needed, repression could be decreased for a certain period, only on condition that it will be started again in the near future.

Thirdly the balance of power between the Party might have played an important role. One of the aims of Khrushchev could be to soften his opponents and prevent any act against himself. He could not tolerate the criticism of being a tolerant leader. He might have wanted to create the image of a strong leader loyal to the main tenets of the socialist rule.²⁸

Fourth reason may be that religion has also been a part of the national culture. It has been an important factor binding people together. Only by repressive policies this sense of togetherness could be destroyed and all people could be russified.²⁹

It is important to note that although Western governments had reliable information about the situation of believers in the Soviet Union at that time, they reacted by no means as opposed to their attitude toward the religious policy during Stalin.³⁰ They preferred to see the liberal face of Khrushchev.

Conclusion

This paper tried to give an account of religious policy implemented by Khrushchev and to discuss the possible reasons for this policy. The persecution of religion during 1959-1964 was considered as one of the repressive periods in Soviet history. I would like to state that the aim of the paper is not to justify what Khrushchev has done in this regard, but to explain the rationale behind his severe attack on believers. To sum up the reasons, it can be argued that Khrushchev recognized the need to exert pressure upon religious activities in order to secure the survival of the socialist system. To implement relatively liberal policies in all fields could give harm to the state. Therefore he should have kept total control in some areas. He deliberately chose religion for this.

Abstract

The rule of Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev has mainly been characterized by the Destalinization campaign and decrease of pressure on the Soviet people. It was thanks to his policies that many people sent to prisons, labor camps and exile during the Stalin era were rehabilitated. However, there was one field exempted from the relative liberalization campaign: Religion. His policy on religion was as repressive as that of Stalin, if not more. This paper aims to shed light on Khrushchev's policy toward religion. The research question

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Georg von Stackelberg, "Sovyetler Birliđi Müslüman Halklar Üzerinde İslamiyet'in Etkisi" (The Influence of Islam Upon Muslim Peoples of Soviet Union), *dergi*, XII/45 (1966), p. 15-16. Also see Jaan Pennar and Ivan I. Bankalo, "The Religious Dimension in Soviet Education", *Studies on the Soviet Union*, IX/2 (1969), p. 59.

³⁰ Pospelovsky, op cit, reference 4, p. 98 and Konstantinov, op. cit., reference 25, p. 40.

of the article is the following: *Why did he carry out repressive policies as regard to religion, while decreasing pressure on other areas?*

Key Words: *Soviet Union, Khrushchev, Religion, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Repression, Stalin.*

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