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Mass Repression of Religious Scholars in Uzbekistan During the "Great Terror" Years

Tashkhodjaev Murodjon Valijonovich

Lecturer, Andijan State Technical Institute

muroddomla@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines the intensification of political and physical persecution of clergy and religious figures in Uzbekistan as a result of the escalation of political and physical repression carried out by the Soviet authorities in 1937–1938, their accusations of anti-Soviet propaganda, and their tragic fate.

Keywords: Soviet Authorities, Totalitarian Regime, Religious Figures, Repression, Great Terror, Persecution, Oppression, Punishment, Emigrant, Fate



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1. Introduction

All the atrocities and mass repressions carried out by Soviet authorities in Uzbekistan were justified by a set of fabricated charges: opposition to the Soviets' and the Communist Party's "industrialization and collectivization policy," being a "foreign element," an "oppressor exploiting human labor," a "nationalist," a "counterrevolutionary," a "pan-Turkist," a "pan-Islamist," or a "spy of international imperialism." [1]

During 1937–1938, political repression reached its peak, and a great many people suffered as a result — including numerous intellectuals and religious scholars. Since it was the intelligentsia and clergy who constituted the governing force of society, repressions primarily targeted them first; thereafter, ordinary, simple rural inhabitants who had merely voiced a single opinion were also subjected to criminal prosecution, imprisoned on political charges, or sentenced to death. [2]

There was a deeply calculated plan behind the escalation of repressions. Its purpose was: first, to eliminate the intellectuals who embodied the strength and power of the people; then, by prosecuting ordinary workers and peasants, to restore the prestige of the Soviet state established through violence; to eradicate independent-thinking individuals root and branch; and thereby to establish colonial rule in the peripheral regions. [3] This process constituted the core substance of Soviet national policy. For this reason, thousands of our compatriots were arrested and subjected to repression without even knowing what political crime they had allegedly committed. [4]

In early July 1937, resolutions were adopted by the Soviet government that determined the fate of hundreds of thousands of future victims of terror. Among these, the most significant was the Politburo's resolution of July 2 "On Anti-Soviet Elements," which served as the effective starting signal for the most sweeping repression operation of the "Great Terror" period. [5]

2. Materials and Methods

The “Great Terror” of 1937–1938, also known in more recent research as the “kulak operation,” marked the peak — the culmination — of the repression policy [6].

It was no coincidence that, on the basis of the VKP(b) Politburo’s resolution of July 2, 1937 “On Anti-Soviet Elements,” the NKVD Commissioner issued Order No. 00447 on July 30, 1937, classified “top secret,” entitled “On the Operation for the Repression of Former Kulaks, Criminals, and Other Anti-Soviet Elements” [7].

State security organs were tasked with “destroying this gang of anti-Soviet elements with the most ruthless speed.” Order No. 00447 also specified exact dates for the commencement of the “kulak operation.” Operations were set to begin on August 5, 1937 in all republics, regions, and oblasts, and on August 10 in the Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, and Kyrgyz SSRs.[8] The order enumerated the categories of persons subject to repression. According to it, former kulaks who had served their sentences and were actively continuing anti-Soviet subversive activities, former kulaks who had escaped from labor camps or special settlements and were engaged in anti-Soviet activities, and kulaks hiding from dekulakization and conducting anti-Soviet activity were classified as “the most active anti-Soviet elements.” The first category was to be “immediately arrested, their cases reviewed by troikas, and shot”; the less active were to be placed in the second category, arrested, and sent to camps for terms of 8 to 10 years [9].

3. Results and Discussion

The struggle against believers and religious institutions intensified during 1937–1938. Together with the rural population, religious figures were compelled to pay a unified agricultural tax, a principal property tax, a civil tax, a poll tax, and a military tax. In addition, in 1923–1924, the district tax commission made it mandatory to purchase two state lottery bonds on top of the property tax.[10] Religious scholars were furthermore required to pay tax on income derived from religious ceremonies, and the tax rate was very high. For example, in 1939, a tax of 621,511 soums was levied on 316 scholars in the Fergana region, while in 1940, 367 scholars were taxed, and an obligation to pay 798,754 soums was imposed on them [11].

Another means of combating religion was to strike at religious scholars. During the agrarian transformations carried out in Turkestan, coinciding with the dekulakization policy and the mass repressions of 1937–1938, religious scholars suffered greatly. In 1940, more than 3,000 scholars were registered in Fergana, one of the largest oblasts in the republic.[12] The majority of them were mosque imams, neighborhood mullahs, Quran reciters (qori), and women religious teachers (otinbibi) operating secretly or openly in cities such as Kokand, Andijan, Margilan, Namangan, Chust, Asaka, and Quva. Due to the additional tax burden imposed on the religious community, some had renounced their religious duties and were compelled to engage in farming or crafts [13].

Yet another method of pressuring religious scholars was to deprive them of old-age pensions. Documents from the Fergana Oblast health department record cases in 1939–1940 where believers residing in various cities of the valley were stripped of their pensions [14]. Despite the pressure exerted against believers, the Soviet authorities were unable to make Muslim scholars completely abandon their faith.

In Professor R.T. Shamsutdinov’s five-volume collected work entitled “Victims of Repression,” a list of nearly 10,800 individuals across Uzbekistan who fell into the trap of repression is provided along with information about them. Among those repressed during the “Great Terror” or “kulak operation” of 1937–1938, the names of 1,027 religious scholars are cited [10. 496]. Furthermore, in a two-volume book published in 2021 under the direction of Professor R.T. Shamsutdinov, covering those from Andijan Province repressed under Tsarist Russia and the Soviet totalitarian regime, extensive information about many repressed religious scholars is also provided [15]. In particular, on August 10, 1937, a “troika” (Zagvozdin, Ikromov, To‘rabekov) handed down verdicts against the following prisoners. Among those sentenced to death were the following religious scholars from

Andijan:

1. Akbarkhanov Eshonkhon To'ra — born 1872, Uzbek, from Niyozmasjid village, Baliqchi district; clergyman and imam. He was tried in 1933 for sabotaging grain procurement and fined 100 soums. He was accused of personally organizing a counterrevolutionary group in Baliqchi district, receiving letters from Afghanistan, fighting against Soviet rule, and taking measures to establish a Muslim state in Uzbekistan.

2. Ummatov Mulla Mamayusuf — born 1879, Uzbek, from Mallachek village, Baliqchi district; religious servant, former wealthy landowner. He was accused of being an active member of the counterrevolutionary group organized by Akbarkhanov, participating in the preparation of counterrevolutionary and insurrectionary cadres, and spreading counterrevolutionary and inflammatory rumors.

3. Fayzikhojayev Jo'rakhoja — born 1868, Uzbek, from Nasriddinbek village, Baliqchi district; former kulak and religious servant and imam. He was accused of participating in a counterrevolutionary organization, attending secret meetings of a counterrevolutionary group, speaking of providing armed assistance to interventionists, and conducting anti-Soviet agitation.

4. Asranqulov Mulla Rizoqul — born 1879, Uzbek, from Tuvoldi village, Baliqchi district; former kulak, religious servant and imam. He was accused of conducting agitation at illegal meetings of the Baliqchi counterrevolutionary group and of claiming that the fall of Soviet power and the establishment of a Muslim state in Uzbekistan was inevitable.

5. Abdukarimov Mulla Nasriddin — born 1875, Uzbek, from Nasriddin village, Baliqchi district; from a clerical family, religious servant, imam, and healer. He was accused of actively participating in a counterrevolutionary organization, attending secret meetings, preparing insurrectionary cadres among collective farm workers, and spreading agitation that Soviet power would soon fall and that Uzbekistan would become a "Muslim state."

6. Beknazarov Mulla Nazar — born 1872, Uzbek, from Niyozmasjid village, Baliqchi district; from a merchant family, religious servant and healer. He was accused of systematically conducting counterrevolutionary and defeatist propaganda by exploiting religious remnants among the kulak segment of the population, claiming Soviet power would soon be liquidated, and participating in secret meetings of the counterrevolutionary organization where the preparation of insurrectionary cadres was discussed.

According to Protocol No. 114 of December 17, 1930 of the "troika" established under the OGPU's Plenipotentiary Representative in Central Asia (pursuant to the USSR CEC resolution of June 9, 1927), Boyzoqov Sanaqul, G'oyberdiev Mullausman, Mullaroziqhon Aliev, Omonullayev Abdulla, Khojamqulov Hojimurolot, and Muqimov Hokimkhon — as mullahs, imams, and religious scholars — were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 to 10 years on charges of being alien elements, ideological leaders of "basmachis," and conducting covert agitation to overthrow the Soviet system. On October 24, 1931, pursuant to a verdict of the OGPU Plenipotentiary's troika in Central Asia, Zulfiqor Boyqulov — a former religious leader and imam — was sentenced to death on the grounds that he had aided the field commanders Husaynbek and later Mulla Haydar from the spring of 1931, ideologically inspired the "basmachis," and fought against Soviet power. On the same day, the troika sentenced the 37-year-old Dosat Toshpo'llatov to death for supporting the field commander Zulfiqor, and the 47-year-old Rustam Qosimov — an imam's son and himself an imam at a mosque — was sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment for joining Mulla Zulfiqor's fighters and inspiring them.

One of the religious scholars who fell victim to Soviet repression policy was Muhammad Isakhon, son of Badalmuhammad (1854–1930). He was born in 1854 in the Charkhchiko'cha neighborhood of the Sebzor district of Tashkent, in an educated family. He studied at the Mir Arab Madrasa. From 1918, Muhammad Isakhon served as chairman of the Society of Scholars (Ulamo Jamiyati). He also issued fatwas to the population on various matters as the a'lam (chief scholar) of the Sebzor district. For nearly 45 years he taught various subjects to students at the Baraqqhon,

Qosimboy, and Khudoyquli Dodhoh madrasas. After the Qosimboy Madrasa was closed, Muhammad Isakhon served as imam-khatib at his local mosque. In 1930, he was arrested by Soviet authorities. As public discontent grew, he was released after 54 days of detention. Muhammad Isakhon did not remain free for long; the tortures of imprisonment had taken their toll, and he died on November 16, 1930.

According to the verdict of May 19, 1932 of the OGPU Plenipotentiary's troika in Central Asia, Oshilov Po'lat — who had worked as a domla-imam until 1926 and whose father was also a religious scholar, and who was accused of opposing the Soviet system and conducting agitation against collectivization — was sentenced to 10 years; Imomov Toshniyoz, an imam's son and religious leader accused of conducting agitation against collectivization, was sentenced to 5 years; and Muzaffarov Nurullamulla — an imam's son who had worked as a qori at a mosque until 1926 and was accused of fighting against the Soviet collectivization policy — was also sentenced to 5 years' deprivation of liberty.

It should be noted that religious scholars and devout individuals who were first subjected to persecution and pressure were compelled, due to savage treatment, to emigrate abroad in order to save their own lives and the lives of their families. Between 1917 and 1939 alone, more than 900,000 people left Central Asia for foreign countries. According to official data, by the end of the 20th century nearly 3 million Uzbeks were living abroad, of whom 2 million were Uzbeks originally from Uzbekistan. One such emigrant was Muhammadjon Khushmaqov, born in 1914 in the village of Naymanche in Töraqo'rg'on district, Namangan region. In 1928–1929, when he was 14–15 years old and studying at a madrasa, the madrasa was closed and its students subjected to persecution, and as a result he emigrated to Turkey.

One of the religious scholars who emigrated abroad under persecution was Abdulboqiy, son of Ro'zi Qori, and his family. He was born in 1925 in Asaka district, Andijan region. His father, Ro'zi Qori, had taught students the Quran and tajwid at madrasas in Andijan. In 1929, Ro'zi Qori fled with his entire family to Kashgar, and died there in 1933. Abdulboqiy, son of Ro'zi Qori, returned to Uzbekistan in 1959 and died in 1993.

Muhammadkhon Mulla Iskhaq Qori o'gli Mahjuriy (1889–1973) was a religious scholar from Andijan. In 1933, he was placed on the list of "disenfranchised" persons (lishentsy). Upon learning of this, Muhammadkhon Makhdum fled to the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan, where he settled.[16]

4. Conclusion

The political and physical persecution of religion, clergy, and believers caused enormous damage to the spiritual culture of the people. Nevertheless, the peoples of Uzbekistan did not entirely abandon religious faith and religious values. Despite Bolshevik violence and repression against religion, they strove to preserve this faith to the extent possible. Even when believers were deprived of their mosques and their rights, they continued to practice their worship in secret. The closure of mosques and madrasas and the repression of the clergy caused great harm to the propagation and establishment of universal moral values and national spirituality among the population. The younger generation was deprived of the vast spiritual heritage left by Islam. This undoubtedly had a negative impact on the social and spiritual life of Uzbekistan during that period.

In sum, religious scholars and members of the clergy, together with those who followed them, were unacceptable to Soviet power. For this reason they became victims of the mass repressions of 1937–1938. The majority of religious scholars had already been stripped of voting rights as "non-laboring income earners" in the early years of Soviet rule and subjected to various economic and political penalties; during the collectivization years of 1929–1933 they were exiled as "kulak" households. By 1937–1938, in the dreadful years of repression known as the "Great Slaughter" or the "kulak operation," they were once again drawn into the vortex of repression. Their tragic fates left indelible marks and sorrows in the lives of their subsequent generations.

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