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Islam in Religious Structure of the Soviet State in 1920s: Revisiting Policies and Regional Practices in a National Region: A Case-Study of Dagestan

Abstract

Growing interest in researching the “gaps” in the post-Soviet Russian history has prompted a large-scale study of regional history. There are issues of particular interest concerning the relationship between authorities and national religious organizations, such as activities of state agencies dealing with Muslims and Muslim religion in the Republic of Dagestan.

Centuries of Islam spreading in Dagestan made it a rallying point for the people, a core national idea. In the first years of Soviet power there were significant changes in authorities' attitude towards Islam. Changes in the sphere of religion sprang not only from the political situation, but were also based on the new Soviet law. Aware of strong religious commitment of the Muslim population of the republic, first Soviet leaders conducted a cautious policy towards Muslim clergy, Islam and Sharia. Taking note of the importance of religion in the lives of the people of Dagestan, the article highlights extremely cautious Soviet policy in spiritual sphere. Thus, for a time Soviet ethno-confessional policy was a half-way, conciliatory one, with many a deviation from the 1918 Decree. The author tries to show the duality of the authorities' attitude towards Islamic religion. Initial attempts to find a compromise between the new power and religion as a worldview and a socio-cultural system, which characterized 1920s, gradually grew into confrontation, as the authorities attempted to supplant religion in the consciousness of the people of Dagestan and their everyday life. The author highlights two stages in the implementation of the Soviet ethno-confessional policy: the compromise and the advance. She assesses the results of the authorities' actions, such as shutting-off of mosques and Muslim schools, confiscation of lands. And yet she contends the ill-success of these attempts to replace all things "Islamic" by secular Soviet features. The Soviets could not eradicate the Islamic institutes, although they forced them to "go underground." The religiousness of the population and the counter-revolutionary opposition of the Muslim clergy baffled the implementation of Soviet anti-religious policies.

The article is based on the archival materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Dagestan and from the Russian State Historical Archive. Periodicals of the period have been introduced into historical scholarship. Some documents, although published, have remained unstudied. The author analyzes main points of the Soviet religious policy towards Muslim population and clergy of the Republic of Dagestan under the above mentioned circumstances and in view of existing national scholarship.

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Keywords

Archive, sources, Dagestan, Soviet state, religious policy, Muslim clergy, Sharia, education.

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