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## **The Anti-Religious Campaign of Soviet Authorities In The Mono-City of Kazakhstan**

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### **Abstract**

This article concerns the main direction of the anti-religious campaign of Soviet authorities in Kazakhstan on the example of Kentau multicultural mono-city. The subject of the study is the policy and practice of local authorities to fulfill the tasks of the anti-religious campaign, the response of believers, the forms of their protection and resistance, the results of the anti-religious campaign in the mono-city. The article analyzes the religious life of Kentau mono-city, built in the second half of the 20th century as a "new city", free from the vices of capitalist society, including religion. When creating new cities, their key feature and main advantage, according to the ideologists of the Soviet authorities, was the lack of historical memory, the past in any of its manifestations, including, in the religious ones. This feature was to contribute to a more active formation in the mono-city of a new life and a new type of man - a Soviet man. The author comes to the conclusion that, despite anti-religious measures on the part of the Soviet authorities and the declaration of the idea "Kentau is a mono-city without mosques and churches," the population continued to perform religious activities, and the spectrum of confessions in the city was wide enough.

**Keywords:** Anti-religious campaign, Kentau mono-city, Communist ideology, Everyday life, Soviet authorities

## **Kazakistan'ın Mono Şehri'nde Sovyet Yetkililerin Din Karşıtı Kampanyaları**

### **Öz**

Bu makalede, Kazakistan'daki Sovyet yetkililerinin, Kentau çok kültürlü mono şehir örneğinde din karşıtı kampanyası ana yönü ile ele alınmıştır. Çalışmanın konusu, politika ve din karşıtı kampanyanın görevleri, inananların tepkisini, onların korunması ve direniş biçimlerini, mono-şehir din karşıtı kampanyasının sonuçları yerine getirmek için yerel yönetimlerin uygulamaların araştırılmasıdır. Makalede, 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında inşa edilen ve din de dâhil olmak üzere kapitalist toplumun ahlaksızlıklarından uzak, “yeni bir şehir” olarak inşa edilen Kentau mono-kentinin dini hayatını incelenmektedir. Sovyet makamlarının ideologlarına göre, yeni şehirler yaratırken, onların temel özelliği ve ana avantajı, tarihsel belleğin eksikliği idi, geçmişte dini olanlar da dâhil olmak üzere tüm tezahürlerinde geçmişti. Bu özellik, yeni bir hayatın mono-şehirinde ve yeni bir insan türü olan Sovyet insanında daha aktif bir forma katkıda bulunacağı ifade edilmekteydi. Sovyet makamlarının din karşıtı tedbirlerine ve "Kentau ilinin cami ve kilisesi olmayan bir mono kent olduğu" fikrine rağmen, nüfusun dini faaliyetler ve spektrum sergilemeye devam ettiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din karşıtı kampanya, Kentau mono şehir, Komünist ideoloji, Gündelik hayat, Sovyet yetkilileri

## INTRODUCTION

Modern Kazakhstan is a democratic legal state. In its Constitution, equality of rights and freedoms of man and citizen is fixed, regardless of gender, race, nationality, religious beliefs. One of the most important freedoms is freedom of conscience. While Kazakhstan is a secular state, religion, due to favorable conditions of state policy and public life, strengthens its influence in society, impact on people's consciousness. Unfortunately, this does not always happen in a civilized way, in some cases there are misunderstandings and even public micro conflicts, when religiosity is opposed to secularism. Such precedents are dangerous for the unity and integrity of society, and given the multinationality and multi-confessional nature of the Kazakh population, they threaten with serious negative consequences. Prevention of religious conflicts, which are mainly born out of fanaticism and religious radicalism, requires study and development of recommendations for the development of state policy in the sphere of religion, while also taking into account the Soviet negative experience in regulating the interaction of religion and the state.

The above mentioned makes the researchers increasingly turn to the history of religion in Kazakhstan, especially in the most difficult periods for them. Such periods, as already noted, refer to the period of the 1950s – the beginning of the 1970s. The change of policy after Stalin's death meant the creation of a new totalitarian system of identity. After that, there was the most active period of the struggle against religion, connected with a "spurt" to communism. The anti-religious campaign of this period with its forms and methods resembled a civil war. As a result, the religiosity of the Soviet man of the 1950s and 1970s was forced into non-public spheres of everyday life<sup>1</sup>.

A detailed study of the anti-religious campaign of this period, especially at the regional levels, gives a lot of concrete examples of people's behavior in extreme situations caused by state pressure, their reaction to both violence and agitation and propaganda work. The study of such specifics allows us to derive both positive and, basically, negative lessons in the relationship between the state and believers. Another important factor determining the relevance of the selected topic is the insufficient study of the anti-religious campaign of the period of the "offensive of communism" in the USSR, especially at the regional level. Meanwhile, without knowing the concrete canvas of events on the ground without conducting a comparative analysis of regional peculiarities of the situation on the ground, it is impossible to get an objective idea of the overall picture of the state offensive against religions in those years and its consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Mukhtarova, *Islam in Soviet Kazakhstan in 1917-1991*, Doctoral Thesis, West Kazakhstan University named after Utemisov, Uralsk, 2007, p.186.

Kentau city is still one of the least explored regions in this regard. Meanwhile, historically at the beginning of the 20th century, a unique polyethnic and polyconfessional society developed in its area, in which Islam, Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Catholicism, as well as, in a smaller number, Judaism and other faiths<sup>2</sup>.

As a matter of fact, in Kentau multi-confessional mono-city, the specific weight of each of the confessions was a kind of microcopy of the religious picture of the entire state, which allows us to speak about a certain universality of the findings of this study on a countrywide scale.

The aim of this article is to study the history and place of religious holidays in the daily life of the population of Kentau city in the post-war period. As the urban population was multinational in composition, representatives of various religious denominations lived here. In the archives, we found documents that indicated that the believers tacitly kept fast, celebrated such religious holidays as "Oraza Bayram", "Kurban Ait", Easter, Christmas, Epiphany. However, they were of an informal and illegal nature. This was due to the fact that in the postwar years, religion was under full control of the Soviet authorities, which did not encourage the development of religious associations, communities, sects, etc.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Before proceeding to the experimental part of the study, it is necessary to determine the most important terms used in the articles and to explain the meaning they carry in this study.

Anti-religious campaigns are a complex of measures taken by the Soviet authorities in the 1950s-1970s, aimed at eliminating religion from the spheres of civil and state life and ending the activities of all faiths. The strategic goal of the anti-religious campaign of the Soviet government was the "eradication" of religion in the whole society as one of the necessary conditions for the construction of a new "bright" future of mankind - communism.

Sect is a closed religious group, separated from one of the religions, opposing it and other religious teachings, tend to, as a rule, to be closed, having a rigid internal organization, its founder and a special teaching.

The concept "mono-city", as a rule, is understood such a settlement, whose life flows around one city-forming enterprise. As a rule, they are of the same profile and determine practically all the economic and social processes taking place in the mono-city. It is known that mono-cities are most common in countries with a large area that have natural resources. At present, there are officially 27 mono-

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<sup>2</sup> A. Abdikhanov, *Confessions of Southern Kazakhstan at the end of the XIX - 80s of the XX century: historical analysis*, Doctoral Thesis. West Kazakhstan University named after Utemisov, Uralsk, 2010, p. 29.

cities in Kazakhstan, where 1.53 million people live, or 16.8% of the country's urban population<sup>3</sup>.

The methodological basis of the study was the interdisciplinary approach. The interdisciplinary approach will allow researchers to view the mono-city as a sociocultural phenomenon, as a self-developing, self-regulating through the behavior of people, thermodynamic system. The main methodological reference point in the study of the religious daily life of Kentau city is F. Braudel's concept. He was one of the first to point out the everyday life of cities as a separate research problem. Methodological value of the school "Annals" is to recognize the mono-city as an self-developing organism. F. Braudel wrote: "The mono-city, wherever it is located, always assumes a certain number of realities and processes, moreover with unquestionable regularity"<sup>4</sup>

Research work is based on traditional principles and methods of historical research, supplemented by some modern approaches, referred to as the "new local history". Historicism and objectivity became the basic principles of the study.

The practical importance of the work also lies in the possibility of applying the results of the study in solving problems of ethno-confessional policy in the region and developing the mechanisms aimed at overcoming social, national and religious intolerance, xenophobia and increasing the level of tolerance in the Kazakh society.

### **ETHNO-CONFESSIONAL SITUATION IN KENTAU CITY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY**

Kentau city is an industrial mono-city of regional subordination in the South Kazakhstan region. It was established in August 1955 on the basis of Mirgalimsai settlement for the development of the Achisai polymetallic deposit. The foundations of the national composition were laid in the early 1950s. The construction of Kentau city began in the framework of industrialization after the Second World War in the steppes of Southern Kazakhstan.

In 1951 a completed production cycle for the lead production was already created at the mono-city-forming enterprise - the Achisai Polymetallic Combine. Kentau originally collected people of different nationalities. It was a multinational structuring, where the first roles were representatives of repressed and deported peoples: Greeks, Chechens, Germans, Tatars, Russians, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> N. Nurlanova, *The main problems of socio-economic development of mono-cities in Kazakhstan*, Scientific Heritage, Almaty, 2012, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> F. Brodel, *The structures of everyday life: the possible and the impossible*, L. Kubel (ed.). Progress, Moscow, 1986, p. 7.

Kazakhs, Uzbeks. Japanese and German prisoners of the war also participated in the construction of the complex<sup>5</sup>.

Thousands of specialists from all corners of the Union came to build the world's second polymetallic combine, after Australia, operating on oxidized ores. Subsequently, many of them settled in cities forever. It was this first wave of residents that formed the basis of the future socio-cultural environment of the mono-city.

Historically, the area of Kentau city in the second half of the twentieth century was a unique conglomeration of many peoples, religions and cultures, the mutual influence of which made a significant contribution to the economic and cultural appearance of the region. Turning to the problem of identifying religious practices in Kentau, it is necessary to analyze the composition of the mono-city population. The social structure of the population of Kentau city was quite diverse. The motley ethnic composition was preserved throughout the entire period existence of Kentau city. Among the residents of Kentau city were prisoners, special settlers, representatives of various social groups and nationalities. The formation of the urban population in Kentau was based on the labor of the Achisai Polymetallic Combine. The density of the population increased significantly.

The replenishment of the urban population proceeded at an accelerated pace, mainly due to forced mass migration of the rural population. As a result, the city experienced a super concentration of labor, mostly cheap and little qualified. And also the mass migration of labor resources from other republics of the USSR, led to overpopulation of cities. Rapid population growth has led not only to a demographic "explosion", but also to a change in the ethnic composition of the urban population. The All-Union Population Census of 1959 showed that more than 30 nationalities lived in Kentau<sup>6</sup>.

Its data, processed by the author with regard to the study region, are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Ethnic composition of Kentau city (1959 census)

| Nationalities | Number | Percent |
|---------------|--------|---------|
| Kazakhs       | 18830  | 30,9    |
| Uzbeks        | 2994   | 6,9     |
| Tatars        | 2453   | 4,7     |

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<sup>5</sup> R. Atabekova, *Kentau: alpys zhyl-alpys beles*, Oner, Almaty, 2015, p.14.

<sup>6</sup> S. Maulenkulov, *Working prowess of Achisay*, Erkin and K-XXI, Kentau, 2010, p.59.

|                |       |      |
|----------------|-------|------|
| Chechens       | 557   | 1,1  |
| Russians       | 12352 | 27   |
| Ukrainians     | 1576  | 3,7  |
| Belorussians   | 140   | 0,3  |
| Greek          | 8276  | 20,5 |
| Germans        | 132   | 0,2  |
| Jewish         | 260   | 0,6  |
| Koreans        | 213   | 0,4  |
| Other ethnoses | 1717  | 3,7  |
| <b>Total:</b>  | 49500 | 100  |

The table shows that the local indigenous population of the Kazakhs remained predominant throughout the period under study, although its numbers slightly changed. On the second place there remained Russians, then there were Greeks and Uzbeks. The rest nationalities were for a small fraction of the total number of inhabitants of the mono-city. A similar ethnic composition in general form also determined the ratio of denominations in the area of Kentau.

**Table 2.** The ratio of the main confessional groups of Kentau city (1959 census)

| Nationalities                               | Religion                | Percent |
|---|-------------------------|---------|
| Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens | Sunni Islam             | 42,5    |
| Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians           | Christian Orthodoxy     | 30,7    |
| The Germans, the Greeks                     | Christian Catholicism   | 20,7    |
| Latvians, Estonians, Koreans                | Christian Protestantism | 2,3     |
| The Jews                                    | Judaism                 | 0,6     |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| Koreans, Russians,<br>Mordvins, Chuvashes, Greeks | Mennonites,<br>Evangelists, Baptists, etc. | 3,2 |
| <b>Total:</b>                                     | -  | 100 |

The table shows that most of the faithful adhered to Islam. In the 1950s, in Kentau city, over 40% of the population was followers of Islam. Local indigenous population of Kazakhs and Uzbeks professed Islam of the Sunni type. The second largest group of believers was Orthodox Christians; their share was over 30%.

However, the hegemony of these religions did not exclude the presence of Catholicism and Protestantism, introduced by foreigners, as well as various sects. In Kentau city there were large religious communities of Western Christianity: Catholics, as well as smaller communities and groups of such Protestant sects as Mennonites, Baptists, Evangelists, etc.<sup>7</sup>.

In general, religious practices in Kentau reflected the most stable views of the population about religious life. Considering that there were no churches and mosques in the mono-city, the residents arranged "prayer houses" in the hostels or in their apartments. It was more difficult to conduct religious events in the hostel - there were too many outsiders. If one of the communists was seen in a church or a mosque, they were expelled from the party and laid from the job. Therefore, the actual opportunities for the people to create a religious space was not. Naturally, such religious activities were not received mass distribution in Kentau. If christening and wedding ceremonies could be eradicated to a greater extent, the funeral, according to eyewitnesses, was conducted strictly in accordance with religious traditions.

In Kentau city there were no mosques and churches, but around the mono-city at a distance of 25-30 km. there were villages with small prayer houses. In the working village of Khantaghi there was 1 Muslim mosque. The main imam of the mosque was Mullah Sh. Shaikhaliev.<sup>8</sup> In Kentau city, among the Muslims, mullahs were chosen who performed the necessary rituals. Reading the sacred books (the Bible, the Koran, etc.) was an inaccessible religious practice. On the one hand, this was due to the lack of opportunities to read religious literature (neighbors, lack of lighting, lack of free time), on the other hand, in the mono-city the books were a deficit. In the libraries of the mono-city, such literature was banned, and it was difficult to bring books privately. All newly arrived in the city passed an isolation checkpoint in which both people and their belongings were sanitized. Consequently, it can be assumed that if workers had

<sup>7</sup> M. Koigeldiev, *The phenomenon of labor in the Soviet society*, Karatau, Almaty, 2016, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> APRK (*Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*) F.708, Op.31, D.169.



any books, they were withdrawn. Keeping fasts as one of the most important religious practices in conditions of latent hunger was also extremely difficult. However, on great holidays, such as Easter or Uraza Bayram, the citizens prepared traditional food. Even the ceremony of burial was impossible to observe in the first years of the construction of the mono-city, up to 1955 there was no cemetery in Kentau. Burials were made in common graves, without establishing monuments or even crosses.

Knowing the size of each ethnic group and its preferential religion, one can also construct a picture that approximates the relative weight of each of the religious communities in Kentau city. It should be noted that belonging to the religion on ethnic grounds is rather arbitrary, because a transition from one denomination to another, the transition from the main religious confessions to sects, moreover, against the backdrop of active anti-religious agitation and propaganda of power began to take its roots atheism.

### **THE MAIN FORMS AND CONTENT OF ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGNS IN KENTAU CITY**

During the period under review, the struggle against the religious consciousness of the population was actively conducted in Kentau city. The spiritual and cultural influence of religion on the broad masses was not consistent with the plans of the authorities, so one of the most important tasks of the Soviet state was to change the old system of values, which was largely concentrated in religious dogma. Although there were no mosques and churches in Kentau, and the authorities saw this as a possibility of forming atheistic everyday life among the townspeople.

In 1954, the decree of Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union "On mistakes in conducting scientific and atheistic propaganda among the population" was adopted, which referred to the need to "avoid any insult to the feelings of believers"<sup>9</sup>.

In this document, in particular, there were the following provisions: "in order to strengthen scientific and atheistic propaganda, there must be used all the diverse forms and means of ideological and political influence on the workers in their native language - lectures, reports, talks, press, radio, cinema, theater. The best party and Komsomol propagandists, intelligentsia and scientific forces should be attracted to scientific atheistic propaganda". Thus, the strategy of eradicating religiosity in the Soviet society was changed.

In 1955, lectures in political schools, clubs, evening party schools and theoretical seminars on the study of history touched on issues that were not directly related to religion and anti-religious propaganda. The main antireligious agitation and propaganda was assigned to the mono-city branch of the society

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<sup>9</sup> APRK F.708, Op.33, D.1508.

"Znanie". It usually developed its work the day before and during the Muslim fasts and the biggest holidays: Uraza-Bayram and Kurban-Bayram<sup>10</sup>.

Such work was usually linked with the elections to the Soviets, other current political and economic events. The work of the society "Znanie" should be aimed at distraction from the posts and holidays. The main activities in the agitation and propaganda struggle against Islam were loud readings, reports and lectures, the harmfulness of religious vestiges and fasts, the harmfulness of religion in relation to the country's defense and production, for which "politically sustained" speakers were attracted. Komsomol, trade union and public organizations were involved to hold campaign.

Anti-religious activities took place at enterprises, in the red corners and in the mono-city's clubs. The activists also conducted "individual and group treatment of believing production workers - Muslims and members of families" during the holidays themselves. In the days of Kurban Bayram they tried to achieve 100% turnout.

In 1960, a new campaign "against religion" began in the country. Toughening against religion can also be seen in newspaper publications. In the local press, "Kentau Pravda", there are articles with catchy titles: "Religion is the opium of the people", "Actively fight against sectarians", "Sectarian networks", etc.

Baptists are representatives of one of the Protestantism branches, showed themselves most actively among minor faiths in Kentau. As already noted, their numbers in the 1960s grew significantly. And the overwhelming majority of Baptists were Russian. In the Baptist community of Kentau city, numbering up to 140 people, about 20% were workers and the same number of employees. The community was headed by the veteran of labor of the Achisai Polymetal Combine A.T. Popov.

The activity of the Baptists was not met with resistance among the population, and quite often, on the contrary, it was encouraged and welcomed. For example, in the working village Achisay in 1956, a meeting of Baptists in Kentau was held, where the Baptist songs were played, as noted in the report of local "atheists" - "combat, calling, clearly of anti-Soviet character"<sup>11</sup>.

In the mono-city there were Mennonite communities. The formation of Mennonite groups in the mono-city Kentau is associated with the deportation of the Greek population from the Black Sea coast and Georgia in 1949.

In 1958, the Mennonite communities numbered 45 people in Kentau city. The community was headed by a certain N.P. Sarmanidi. For organization of illegal religious assemblies, N.P. Sarmanidi was arrested and convicted in September

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<sup>10</sup> K. Abdrakhmanova, *The everyday life of the cities of Central Kazakhstan in 1945-1953*, Doctoral Thesis, Karaganda State University, Karaganda, 2009, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> KRSA (*Kentau regional state archive*), F.57, Op1, D.489.

1958 for 4 years imprisonment. But the arrest of individual preachers could no longer seriously influence on the religious life of the Mennonites, the organization of meetings changed hands<sup>12</sup>.

Despite the anti-religious campaigns and repressions, the religious life of Muslims in Kentau city in the 1950s continued. Thus, in the village of Khantagi on the holiday of Kurban Bayram, which was held on June 20, 1957, about 500 people gathered and slaughtered 30 small sheep<sup>13</sup>.

In 1961, the authorized Council for Religious Affairs in Kentau noted that "the most common currents in the mono-city include Sunni Islam, a sect of Baptists and Jews. Special manifestations of the Muslim faith occurred in the village of Khantaghi, where there was a mosque. For example, in 1960 in the mosque of Khantaga during the Oraza Bayram gathered about a thousand believers. On the day of the holiday, the donations amounted to 20,000 rubles. It was noted that religious rituals were held among the Muslim population, in particular, the mullahs who were illegally elected by the believers commit circumcision. Till now inhabitants tell, that in cities vagrant mullahs go. They are invited specifically for the accompanying of the deceased, the name-naming of babies"<sup>14</sup>.

The mullahs, according to the organizers of the anti-Islamic campaign, did not openly oppose the Soviet authorities, but with the authority among the population, agitated for the religious education of children, for payment to the servants of the cult and their support. Mullah enjoyed great prestige among the faithful of the city.

The greatest destructive force in the struggle against the religious consciousness of the population was the Soviet education, which was built on the basis of Marxist ideology. Its postulates were most actively assimilated by the young people who predominate in the mono-city.

The city committee demanded that the city schools collectives strengthen the anti-religious education of children and their parents, and actively use anti-religious materials in the educational process.

In 1961, the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted decision "on strengthening control over the implementation of legislation on cults"<sup>15</sup>.

After its adoption throughout the country, a one-time account of religious associations was taken. It turned out that the whole religious spectrum is

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<sup>12</sup> A.Sadykova, *The policy of the Soviet authorities in the sphere of religion (1918-1953)*, Doctoral Thesis, Kazakh National University named after Al-Farabi, Almaty, 2015, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> APRK F.708, Op.57, D.1421.

<sup>14</sup> APRK F.708, Op.65, D.1293.

<sup>15</sup> B. Auanasova, *History of the evolution of religious relations in Kazakhstan in 1917-1991*. Doctoral Thesis. West Kazakhstan University named after Utemisov, Uralsk, 2007, p. 127.

represented in Kentau city: Christians - Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims.

For religious communities, stricter conditions were created: they constantly talked with members of these communities, forced to provide full information about their activities, it was forbidden to conduct any propaganda, openly to hold any religious holidays and customs. In order not to become visible to the bodies of the Soviet authority, people tried covertly, informally and secretly to perform divine services. Muslims, Christians, Protestants, etc. in these conditions performed prayers, funeral, christening, and celebrated religious holidays, which had a centuries-old tradition. Religious holidays were officially excluded from the everyday life of Soviet people. However, despite all the ideological bans of the Soviet authorities, active anti-religious propaganda continued to take place in the everyday life of people who visited mosques, churches, prayed, christened children, celebrated the deceased, etc.

The result of the anti-religious campaign of Soviet authorities in Kentau city, as well as throughout the country, was the centuries-old religious way of life of the population, a large number of repressed clergymen and believers, and perhaps the most sensitive: the replacement of the moral ideals of a large part of society from religious to communist.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The uniqueness of ethno-confessional features of Kentau city was that historically it became a place for long-term coexistence of representatives of virtually all Christian trends, which prevailed in their number and determined the development of the region. At the same time, Islam played an important role in the region; the presence of Judaism was noticeable. The formed polyethnic and polyconfessional society was distinguished by a high level of tolerance and interconfessional interaction.

A simple people, deprived of the usual opportunities to satisfy their spiritual needs, adapted to the new realities of life and absorbed all the mysticism, which was in any case more attractive than reality, as a sponge. However, it was still a temporary phenomenon. As a result of persistent and constant propaganda and agitation, real successes in building a new society, especially in the economy and socio-cultural politics, the old religion was replaced by a communist worldview.

In general, the repressive propaganda strategy did not lead to the desired results. It did not find absolute support both among the party-soviet nomenclatures and in the mass sentiments of the rank-and-file party members, including propagandists and active supporters of Soviet ideology. The reciprocal reaction of people to the claims of power in the sphere of public life became everyday practices and behaviors that created an inimitable image of the living

environment, the history of the everyday life of Soviet society in the second half of the XXth century.

Thus, until the collapse of the USSR and the formation of independent states, the struggle against religion was conducted by administrative-will methods. The policy of the party and state was aimed at forming an atheistic worldview, the basis of which was the communist ideology.

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