

The Soviet Union and Islam: An Overview

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Abstract: -

Islam is one of the oldest religions in the Russian federation and it has played a critical role in shaping the Russian identity, society, culture and security related dynamics. This article provides an overview of Islam during the Soviet period. An attempt has been made to map the Soviet policies in regard to Muslims and Islam during the Soviet period. Initially, in the wake of the revolution, the Bolsheviks promised full religious freedom to the Muslims. Though, this promise was never fulfilled as the Soviet state was committed to develop a 'scientific atheism' under the broader framework of the Soviet model. The article analyses the religious approach of different political leaders starting from Lenin to Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's programme of glasnost and perestroika unleashed a new type of religious freedom and paved the way for religious revivalism. However, the most significant point is that despite so much repression and harsh treatment by the Soviet Union, Islam survived more successfully than any other religion.

Key words: Islam, Religion, Bolsheviks, Communist, Muslim, Soviet Union

A Brief Account

After Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India and Turkey, the Soviet Union was the fifth-largest Muslim-inhabited nation in the world with 45–50 million Muslims (Bennigsen and Broxup, 1983: 1). According to some researchers, such as Vitaly Naumkin (1992), there were 60–70 million Muslims living in the former Soviet Union (Naumkin 1992: 132). The word “Muslim” has cultural and national as well as religious overtones in the Soviet Union. Typically, the word “Muslim” is used to describe someone who belonged to the Muslim culture and faith before the 1917 revolution. Muslims in the Soviet period were affected psychologically and behaviourally by their culture (Bennigsen and Broxup 1983: 1).

The essential principles of the state were transformed by the Bolshevik Russian Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks promised everyone social justice, land and peace.

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