

VICTIMS OF POLITICAL REPRESSIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA:
HISTORICAL MEMORY AND LEGACY

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Abstract: This paper explores the history, scope, and lasting impact of political repressions in Central Asia during the Soviet period, particularly under Joseph Stalin's regime (1920s–1950s). Based on historical documents, archival materials, and contemporary scholarship, the study analyzes how mass purges, executions, and deportations reshaped the political, social, and cultural landscape of the region. The article also discusses the rehabilitation process of the victims and the modern efforts to preserve the memory of those who suffered.

Introduction: The history of political repression in Central Asia is inseparable from the broader context of Soviet totalitarianism. Following the establishment of Soviet power in the early 1920s, the new regime sought to eliminate any form of dissent or national resistance. The policy of repression reached its peak during the Great Purge (1936–1938), when thousands of intellectuals, politicians, and ordinary citizens were accused of "counter-revolutionary" activities and executed or imprisoned.

Historical Background

The Soviet government's central goal in Central Asia was to consolidate power by suppressing nationalist movements and traditional elites. The early 1930s witnessed the persecution of local leaders who had participated in the Jadid movement — reformers who advocated for modern education, cultural revival, and autonomy. Figures such as Fitrat, Abdurauf Fitrat, Abdulhamid Cholpon, and Usmon Nosir became symbols of intellectual resistance. Most of them were executed or imprisoned on false charges of nationalism or espionage.

The Stalinist purges extended beyond the intelligentsia. Thousands of farmers, religious leaders, and former Basmachi fighters were also targeted. Collectivization policies led to mass deportations and famine, devastating rural populations across Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

Extent and Nature of Repressions

According to archival estimates, between 1930 and 1940, more than 1.5 million people in Central Asia were affected by political repressions. Many were sent to Gulag labor camps located in Siberia and northern Kazakhstan. The repression system functioned as an instrument of fear and control, eradicating local elites and replacing them with loyal Communist cadres.

The repressions were not only political but also cultural. The Latin-based Turkic scripts were replaced by Cyrillic alphabets in the late 1930s, further isolating Central

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Asia from its pre-Soviet intellectual heritage. Mosques, madrasas, and religious schools were closed, and Islamic scholars were persecuted as “reactionaries.”

Rehabilitation and Memory

After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet government initiated partial rehabilitation of the victims. However, the full scope of the tragedy became publicly acknowledged only after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Independent Central Asian states established commissions to investigate the repressions and honor the victims.

In Uzbekistan, 31 August is officially commemorated as the Day of Remembrance of Victims of Repressions. Monuments, museums, and research centers have been created to preserve their legacy. Similar initiatives exist in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, reflecting a shared regional effort to restore historical justice and strengthen national identity.

Conclusion: The political repressions in Central Asia left deep scars on society. They destroyed a generation of thinkers and leaders who might have shaped an independent cultural and political path for the region. Remembering and studying this history is not only an act of justice for the victims but also a safeguard against future totalitarian tendencies. The legacy of the repressed continues to inspire new generations to value freedom, knowledge, and national dignity.

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