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THE SOVIET PARADOX: SIMULTANEOUS ACTS OF PRESERVING AND DESTROYING THE MAUSOLEUM OF KHOJA AHMED YASAWI

SOVYET PARADOKSU: HOCA AHMET YESEVİ TÜRBESİNİ KORUMA VE YOK ETME EYLEMLERİNİN EŞZAMANLILIĞI

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Abstract

The article examines and compares the Soviet authorities' efforts to eliminate the religious significance of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum, as well as their attempts to preserve and promote it as a historical monument. It is well known that atheist ideology had a negative impact on Islam, particularly on Sufism and Islamic sacred sites. In their efforts to reshape society into a secular and atheist one, the Bolsheviks viewed Sufi traditions and major Sufi religious centers, which were deeply revered by the people, as significant obstacles to their agenda. In this regard, the main goal and objective of this study is to analyze how Soviet authorities sought to reduce the religious importance of the Yasawi Mausoleum while preserving it as a historical and cultural monument, based on newly uncovered archival documents. To abolish the religious and spiritual significance of the Yasawi Mausoleum, regarded as the "Second Mecca" by the local population, the Soviet authorities strove to prevent believers from visiting it and attempted to convert the Mausoleum into an atheist museum. Although rapid restoration was necessary to achieve it, various factors prolonged the renovation work. After the lengthy restoration, the museum established within the Yasawi Mausoleum was not officially labeled as atheist, yet its primary function included promoting atheist propaganda. Therefore, this article examines and compares these contradictory actions of the Bolsheviks concerning the Mausoleum, drawing on primary sources.

Keywords: Soviet Kazakhstan, Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, Sufism, Atheism, Restoration.

Öz

Çalışmada, Sovyet yönetiminin Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Türbesi'nin dini önemini ortadan kaldırma ve onu tarihi bir anıt olarak koruma ve tanıtma faaliyetleri karşılaştırılarak değerlendirilmektedir. Ateist ideolojinin İslamı, özellikle tasavvufu ve İslami kutsal yerleri olumsuz etkilediği bellidir. Bolşeviklerin toplumu laik ve ateist bir topluma dönüştürme hedeflerinin önündeki engellerden biri de tasavvuf gelenekleri ve halk tarafından kutsal kabul

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edilen büyük tasavvufi din merkezleri idi. Bu bağlamda, çalışmanın temel amacı, Sovyet yönetiminin Ahmet Yesevi Türbesi'nin dini önemini ortadan kaldırma ve onu tarihi ve kültürel bir anıt olarak koruma ve tanıtma çabalarını yeni arşiv belgelerine dayanarak analiz etmektir. Sovyet yönetimi, yerel halk tarafından "İkinci Mekke" olarak kutsal kabul edilen Ahmet Yesevi Türbesi'nin dini ve manevi önemini ortadan kaldırmak için, inananların orayı ziyaret etmesini engellemeye ve türbeyi ateizm müzesi haline getirmeye çalışmıştır. Bunun için türbenin hızla restore edilmesi gerekiyordu ancak çeşitli nedenlerle yenileme çalışmaları çok uzun sürmüştür. Uzun süren tadilatlardan sonra Ahmet Yesevi Türbesi'nde açılan müze, ateizm müzesi olarak adlandırılmasa da onun asıl görevi ateizm propagandası yapmak olmuştur. Dolayısıyla Bolşeviklerin söz konusu türbeye ilişkin bunun gibi çelişkili eylemleri birinci el kaynaklar aracılığıyla karşılaştırılarak anlatılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sovyet Kazakistanı, Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Türbesi, Tasavvuf, Ateizm, Restorasyon.

Introduction

The Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum in Turkestan, Kazakhstan, is a key historical monument in Central Asia. It was built in the 14th century by Amir Timur and became the region's largest religious center. Known as the "Second Mecca" by nomadic Kazakhs, it was contested by regional khanates and factions until Turkestan fell under Russian control in the late 19th century. As a major Sufi center, it also held political importance as the burial site of Kazakh khans, sultans, and prominent leaders. For example, studies examining the functions and institutional structures of tekkes (sufi lodges) in the Ottoman period clearly demonstrate the historical and social relations that Sufi sacred centers established with the state, particularly through the waqf system (Köç, 2016, 797-822). Similarly, it is emphasized that tekkes and saintly tombs in the Ottoman lands and adjacent regions functioned not merely as sites of religious practice but also as sacred centers with historical and social significance (Eyice, 1967, 593-596). From this perspective, it is appropriate to consider the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum as a multilayered historical center that was reinterpreted and administered under different political authorities. This phenomenon may also be examined through parallels with the Haji Bektash Veli Complex in Anatolia, since within the menakibname tradition, Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is referred to as the "epic master" of Haji Bektash Veli (Taşğın, 2014, 267-272). As scholars have noted, the spread of the Yasawi tradition to Anatolia manifested not only at the level of religious doctrine but also as a mode of organizing social, economic, and symbolic space through the establishment of sacred centers based on zawiyas (sufi lodges), which allows for a deeper understanding of the political and ideological significance of the Yasawi mausoleum in later periods (Şahbaz, 2025, 168-179). The ethical content of the Yasawi doctrine, shaped on the basis of the Divan-ı Hikmet, reflects a worldview that influenced social life, which in turn allows for an understanding of how the Yasawi mausoleum was reinterpreted in cultural and ideological terms during the Soviet period (İlhan, 2024, 199-217). However, this study is not a comparative analysis; instead, it focuses on the transformation of the Mausoleum during the Soviet period.

Political changes impacted the Mausoleum after Russian rule began in the Turkestan region. Atheist ideology led to campaigns against Islam, especially Sufi traditions and the Yasawi Mausoleum was one of the main targets of these efforts. The Bolsheviks portrayed Yasawi's Sufi teachings as "antithetical to progress" and, with their veneration, labeled "ignorance." However, while they sought to secularize the Yasawi Mausoleum by eradicating its religious significance for atheist

propaganda purposes, they simultaneously recognized its historical and cultural value. Consequently, they took measures to preserve and restore the monument and protect it from structural decay. This paradoxical approach showed contradictory ways in managing significant religious and historical heritage sites. The term "destruction" is not used to denote the physical demolition in this study. Instead, it refers to atheistic policies aimed at undermining its centuries-old religious and spiritual significance as a sacred site, including the processes of desacralization, delegitimization, propaganda, and museification. By contrast, "preservation/restoration" refers to measures intended to protect the mausoleum, as a historical and architectural monument, from the risk of collapse and to transform it into state-owned cultural heritage. Hence, the conflicting decisions and actions of the Soviet regime regarding the Mausoleum were analyzed in the given study. It highlights the complex interplay between Soviet authority, atheist ideology and cultural heritage, underscoring the significance of the topic. This article delves into the Soviet regime's broader policies toward religion and religiously significant historical monuments based on archival records. Additionally, it contributes to ongoing debates on the preservation of cultural heritage with religious significance under an atheist regime and helps fill a research gap on the history of Sufi sacred sites in Soviet Kazakhstan. The primary objective of the research is to analyze the paradoxical policies of the Bolsheviks regarding the Mausoleum during the Soviet period, based on newly discovered archival records. On the other hand, it examines the ideological motivations behind the secularization of the Mausoleum and its repurpose, investigates the measures taken to preserve it as a historical and architectural monument and assesses the impact of Soviet policies on the religious significance of the Mausoleum and the local population's religious beliefs. The key focus of the research is to provide a broader analysis of how the Soviet authorities navigated the contradictions between their atheist agenda and the preservation of cultural heritage.

The study is based on an analysis of archival documents, particularly official decrees, reports, letters, and other records issued by the Soviet authorities concerning the Mausoleum. Accordingly, the main sources of this article are from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (CSARK), specifically from Fund 1711 *(Commissioner of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR for the Kazakh SSR, 1944-1965),* Fund 2079 *(Authorized Representative of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR for the Kazakh SSR, 1966-1974),* and Fund 1890 *(Ministry of Culture of the Kazakh SSR).* Additionally, documents from the Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (PARK), particularly Fund 708 *(Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, 1937-1991),* and from the Turkestan Regional State Archive (TRSA), specifically Fund 1353 *(Authorized Representative of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR for the South Kazakhstan Region, 1944-1989),* are also utilized. Furthermore, additional sources such as document collections, newspapers, and memoirs (for example, Dulatuly, 1913; Aimauytov, 1928; Gordlevsky, 1929; Petrash, 1981), as well as various scholarly articles and monographs on the topic serve as supplementary sources for this research. This study integrates qualitative and comparative historical analysis to provide a comprehensive account of the Soviet authorities' stance toward the Mausoleum. Hence, it aims to illustrate the diverse relationship between politics, ideology and cultural heritage through primary (archival) sources. Using the Yasawi Mausoleum as a case study contributes to thoroughly understand the historical process surrounding the Soviet

efforts to eliminate the religious significance of sacred sites while simultaneously working to preserve them.

Numerous studies have been published on Soviet policies toward Sufi traditions and sacred Sufi sites in Central Asia since the dissolution of the USSR. However, specialized research on the paradoxical policies of the Soviet authorities regarding sacred sites in Kazakhstan, particularly the Yasawi Mausoleum, remains scarce. For example, studies by Keller (2001) and Sartori and Babajanov (2023), referenced in this research, examine the policies of local Soviet authorities and the official religious administration toward Sufi traditions in Central Asia, particularly in Soviet Uzbekistan, during the early Soviet period and the 1960s–1980s. The studies by Frank (2019) and Muminov (2014) primarily focus on Sufism in Soviet Kazakhstan and the lives of prominent Sufi ishans under the atheist regime. Meanwhile, Deweese (2011) examines how Yasawi and Diwani-i Hikmet were portrayed in the works of Soviet researchers influenced by atheist ideology. Similarly, the studies by Zarcone (2012) and Tasar (2018) explore the impact of the Soviet atheist system on the Yasawi Mausoleum, known as the "Second Mecca" as well as other sacred sites and revered figures. Additionally, the article by the Kazakhstani scholar Yölgin (2019) provides valuable data on research and restoration efforts related to the Mausoleum in the late 1920s. However, none of the studies include information on the Bolsheviks' attempts to erase the religious significance of the Mausoleum and convert it into an atheist museum. Meanwhile, Bustanov's (2024) study provides a brief overview of the atheist policies toward the Yasawi Mausoleum, particularly the Orientalist studies conducted during the Soviet period and their promotion for political purposes. This study aims to address the aforementioned gaps. Drawing on newly uncovered archival materials, it offers a comprehensive analysis not only of the atheist assault on sacred sites, including the Yasawi Mausoleum, but also of their simultaneous preservation, political promotion, and the atheist propaganda conducted within the museum housed in the Mausoleum.

1. The Portrayal of Sufis as "Charlatans"

The Bolsheviks, aiming for an atheist society, first targeted Sufism and its sanctity before attacking sacred sites. They sought to weaken both Sufi sheikhs and ishans, who wielded great influence in Central Asia, as well as religious centers such as the Yasawi Mausoleum. Their reforms deeply affected the ishans, who responded in various ways, as their property was also seized during forced collectivization. Opposing these reforms, the ishans were labeled as enemies of collectivization and classified as part of the "exploiting" class. Consequently, they were stripped of voting rights, portrayed as symbols of ignorance, false beliefs, and violence against women, opposing the Soviet "women's liberation" campaign and marginalized in1930s. In Uzbekistan, for instance, ishans and murids opposed the campaign, leading to a woman's death in 1928. Soviet propaganda branded them as fierce opponents of the anti-veil movement (Frank, 2019, 71-78). Some ishans opposing the paranja ban were arrested, while others committed suicide in protest. Sultanhan Ishan from Samarkand hanged himself in March 1927, rejecting the "women's liberation" campaign. One ishan declared, "I refuse to live in the shame of unveiled Muslim women." In Tashkent, ishans preached that true Muslim women would resist, calling the reform a "vile act" and equating unveiling with aiding "infidel" rulers (Keller, 2001, 115-117).

Communist researchers labeled Sufism, including the Yasawi's teachings, as "harmful" to society from 1927. They linked it to Buddhism and urged opposition to its spread (Khasanov, 2024, 102). Ishans were portrayed as "charlatans", "exploiters of peasants" and "instigators of religious fanaticism" in anti-religious literature from that period onward (Smirnov, 1930, 20). Sufism was said to borrow sainthood concepts from other religions and was linked to shamanism, with dhikr compared to shamanic rituals (Duisenbin, 1958, 9, 16) and it was interpreted as a movement that emerged in response to the oppression of feudal lords. Additionally, Sufi philosophy was linked to Neoplatonism and pantheism, and it was claimed to be "contrary to Islam" (Tazhikova, 1978, 10-12). This perspective remained dominant throughout the Soviet period. Soviet historiography even described Sufism as being outside of orthodox Islam and labeled it as the religion of the exploiting class. Sufi activities were deemed "parasitic," while ishanism and pilgrimages were seen as anti-socialist (Shodiev, 1983, 4–8, 126).

Soviet officials used "ishanism" and "muridism" for Sufism. Despite 1930s repression, religious life revived in WWII, with growing Eid crowds, pilgrimages, and active Sufi leaders. This demonstrated that ishans still held considerable influence in Central Asia. Researcher Tasar notes that in 1943, when the official Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was founded, its early leaders upheld Sufism's pir-murid (spiritual master-disciple) tradition. First mufti Eshon Babakhan had Naqshbandi ties, but his son, Ziyauddin Babakhanov, later distanced himself from Sufism (Tasar, 2018, 260-269).

After the war years, authorities began referring to Sufism, ishanism, and muridism as "sectarian manifestations of Islam" (Muminov, 2014, 341). In the 1950s, SADUM issued a fatwa against ishanism under state directives. Additionally, a negative image of Sufis was systematically constructed through scientific and literary works and periodicals (Zholdassuly, 2024, 51-67). Thus, the state effectively used SADUM to serve its own objectives. SADUM aligned with the government, intensified attacks on Sufi traditions from the 1960s-1980s, especially targeting pilgrimages and dhikr (Sartori-Babajanov, 2023, 307-312). The Bolsheviks struggled to suppress Sufism. Sufis and dervishes in South Kazakhstan grew active before Eid in 1956, publicly praising Allah and Prophet Muhammad, possibly organizing dhikr (Turkestan Regional State Archive (TRSA), Fund 1353, Register 2, Case 28, Page 53). Soviet anti-religious propaganda targeted both Sufism and sacred sites by the late 1950s. The Party ordered propagandists to document pilgrimages and expose Sufi figures as "charlatans" leading believers into "delusion" (Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (PARK), Fund 708, Register 31, Case 265, Page 46).

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Soviet propaganda in Kazakhstan targeted Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, ridiculing and portraying him as backward. Historians and ethnographers routinely criticized him in anti-Sufi writings (Deweese, 2011, 273-277). Before World War II, writer Askar Tokmagambetov wrote a large-scale drama titled "Aziret Sultan" with the goal of discrediting and ridiculing Yasawism. This play was staged at the Kazakh Academic Drama Theater in Almaty as part of the Soviet anti-religious propaganda campaign (Zholdassuly, 2024, 62). During Nikita Khrushchev's era, Tokmagambetov continued his criticism of Yasawi's legacy by writing another play titled "Obyrlar Oynagy" (The Feast of Parasites). This work aimed to "expose the dark deeds" that allegedly took place around Yasawi's mausoleum before the October Revolution, further reinforcing the Soviet ideological narrative against Sufism and sacred sites. The Kyzylorda Regional Kazakh Drama Theater decided to stage

Tokmagambetov's play in 1962 (PARK, 708/35/1285/54-55). Additionally, the anti-ishanism film "Doroga iz Mraka" (Road Out of Darkness) was shown alongside other atheist films in Kyzylorda cinemas. Besides cultural organizations, other institutions also joined this propaganda campaign. For instance, the representative of the Republican Council for Religious Affairs (CARC) for Shymkent region Sh. Ospanov criticized the Republican Society for the Dissemination of Scientific and Political Knowledge in his 1963 report. He condemned the organization for failing to publish a single brochure that "exposed Yasawi's spiritual activities as those of a Sufi fanatic" (Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (CSARK), Fund 1711, Register 1, Case 111, Page 46). It shows that the Bolsheviks employed all means to discredit Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. The campaign against Yasawism was particularly active in Turkestan during the 1960s, the very city where his mausoleum was located. Orynbay Dastanov who served at the Mausoleum for years, for example, published books that promoted an atheistic critique of Yasawi and the practice of pilgrimage there. His 1967 book, "Aulieli zherler Turaly Aqiqat" (The Truth About Sacred Places), and his 1970 collection of stories, "Muragerler" (Heirs), both condemned Yasawi and pilgrimage, supporting Soviet anti-religious propaganda (Zholdassuly, 2024, 66-67).

2. Pilgrimage to the "Second Mecca" and the Atheistic Propaganda Against It

The main target of the Bolsheviks' campaign against Sufism in Central Asia was the Mausoleums of renowned Sufi figures such as Khoja Ahmed Yasawi and Bahauddin Naqshbandi. Seen as sacred and drawing pilgrims, these sites faced Soviet efforts to abolish their religious significance, especially the Yasawi Mausoleum for being Soviet Kazakhstan's key sacred site. This was because, "religion was an obstacle to people's active participation in the construction of the communist system" for the Communists. They viewed religion and religious traditions as "remnants of the past that encouraged indifference toward labor, collectivism, and women's freedom, justifying and preserving outdated social norms" (PARK, 708/33/1546/45).

Archival records reveal that the Yasawi Mausoleum was under constant scrutiny of the CARC during this period. Reports frequently discussed the history of the Mausoleum's construction and its significance for believers. In 1958, CARC representative Sh. Ospanov wrote that the renowned Islamic scholar (ulema) of Central Asian history and author of "Diwan-i Hikmet", Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, had his tomb covered by a grand mausoleum built by the famous "conqueror" Amir Timur with the intention of promoting Sufism (CSARK, 1711/1/70/105). As a religious center, the Mausoleum was frequently discussed at Party meetings. For example, at a meeting of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan on October 5, 1960, it was noted that Turkestan had long been one of the most important Islamic centers in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The meeting noted that in the 15th century, Amir Timur ordered a mausoleum over Yasawi's tomb, naming him among the "saints." Records show the Mausoleum drew 15,000 pilgrims in one year, generating 60,000 rubles (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1960 was 80,6 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 744 monthly salaries.) after the October Revolution. Before the revolution, earnings were even higher (PARK, 708/33/1546/44). Furthermore, the document states: "After the October Revolution, workers closed the Mausoleum, placing it under Soviet protection. Yet, some Muslims and religious figures still exploit Yasawi's name, violating socialist laws, spreading rumors, preaching "false miracles," interfering in families, and mocking human dignity (PARK, 708/33/1546/45).

Sh. Ospanov noted that in 1963, the Yasawi Mausoleum received special attention for its spiritual significance, remaining the "Second Mecca" for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (CSARK, 1711/1/111/45). The Bolsheviks sought to erase the "Second Mecca's" religious role. Over time, the Mausoleum became a major sacred site in Central Asia, with pilgrimage to Turkestan seen as equal to Hajj. For example, historian Ruzbeh-Khan Isfahani described the Yasawi Mausoleum as "the Kaaba of ascetics" and stated that "this sacred mausoleum is considered the Kaaba of Turkestan in his 16th-century writings." Hence, it was regarded as the "Second Qibla" at the beginning of the 20th century. A well-known saying widely circulated among the people: "Muhammad in Medina, Khoja Ahmed in Turkestan" (Zarcone, 2012, 262-263). At that time, Kazakh intellectual Mirzhaqyp Dulatuly, in his article "Khaziret Sultan" wrote that those who had performed a pilgrimage to the Yasawi Mausoleum were considered no less than those who had completed the Hajj to Mecca. He noted that people treated them with the same respect as those returning from Mecca. The article published in the 1913 issue of the "Kazak" newspaper (Dulatuly, 1998, 41).

Before the Soviet government took the Yasawi Mausoleum under its protection, it was owned by sacred Khodja families, who possessed large land estates and received donations from visitors. However, during Amir Timur's era, only Sayyid Khodjas, who were direct descendants of Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn, recognized as the true heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. Historical records indicate that for this reason, Amir Timur appointed Sayyid Khodjas (Alid-Husaynis) as the mutawallis (caretakers) of the Mausoleum's endowment (waqf), rather than the descendants of Muhammad Hanafiya (Muminov, 2023, 309). Researcher Gordlevsky stated that the district of Turkestan included twelve villages or irrigation creek in his 1929 article. Each village was associated with a specific "Ata" (mystical father). At the head of each village lived the Äzlers (from "Azizler" meaning "saints"), who were considered descendants or heirs of that Ata. Äzlers ensured that a portion of the income, known as kharaj, was donated to the sacred Yasawi Mausoleum. These villages were spiritually subordinate to the Äzlers of Turkestan. They led the dhikr at the khanqah, as were regarded as the heirs of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. There was a tradition that once the chief Äzler announced the start of dhikr, the twelve Äzlers of the surrounding region would take turns organizing dhikr ceremonies in the khalwat (spiritual retreat chamber) (Gordlevsky, 1962, 363–364). Centuries-old traditions ended in the Soviet era when the Mausoleum became state property.

Before Tsarist rule, the Mausoleum was contested among khanates, with its construction driven by political motives. After Amir Timur, his successors and those of Genghis Khan leveraged the Yasawi cult as a symbol to legitimize their authority. Later, in the 16th century, Kazakh khans and Abulkhair Khan's descendants fought for Turkestan. From the early 17th century, it became a royal burial site, where Kazakh khans, their family members, biys (judges), and batyrs (warriors) were laid to rest. In total, 18 Kazakh khans, eight biys, and twenty-eight batyrs were buried in the Mausoleum complex. In the 18th century, Turkestan also served as a site for khans' coronation ceremonies. Abylmambet Khan of the Middle Zhuz (1737–1738) and the renowned Ablai Khan (1771–1781) were both proclaimed khans there, lifted on a white felt cloth in accordance with Kazakh tradition. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, Bukhara's ruler first controlled Turkestan, followed by Yunus Khoja (c. 1794–1804), the ruler of Tashkent. The Kokand Khanate captured Turkestan in 1819 and ruled the region until 1865. During the Kokand period, many tombs of Kazakh khans, spiritual leaders, and their followers, which were located

inside and around the Yasawi Mausoleum, were destroyed. Only the tombstones of Amir Timur (1370–1506) and the Abulkhair dynasty (1500–1598) figures remained intact (Muminov, 2016, 721-723).

After Russia took over Turkestan, donations from 150 households to the Yasawi Mausoleum declined. Waqf revenues fell, half were abolished and Soviets removed its religious leadership by the late 1920s. However, Gordlevsky criticized the fact that some sheikhs still regularly "stood guard" at the Mausoleum gates, accusing them of being like "wild animals lurking for their prey," greedily competing for free donations such as bread and money. Additionally, Gordlevsky confirmed that at that time, visiting the Yasawi Mausoleum was considered a "partial Hajj". When pilgrims arrived, the caretaker (shyraqshy) would open the doors leading to Yasawi's tomb. According to Gordlevsky, after the pilgrims finished their prayers, the caretaker would silently recite the "Fatiha" surah and then say "Amin" aloud. The caretaker let pilgrims kiss a prayer bead from the grave or take soil from the tomb. In his absence, they touched and rubbed the tomb door in devotion (Gordlevsky, 1962, 365-366). Despite bans, the Mausoleum retained its religious significance in the Soviet era. In 1929, Kazakh writer Zhusipbek Aimauytov recalled two caretakers and noted its library once held 30,000 books, but none remained by his visit. Aimauytov accused the khojas of "milking the Mausoleum for sustenance" for centuries and competing for pilgrim offerings. He condemned the ishans for misleading the masses and warned against the Yasawi Mausoleum's "half-Mecca" status among the "ignorant (Aimauytov, 2013, 297–298, 303–304). Aimauytov's writings clearly supported atheistic propaganda against Yasawism.

Soviet historiography consistently condemned the Yasawi Mausoleum and its pilgrimage site. For example, in 1981, researcher Yu. G. Petrash wrote on Yasawism from an atheistic point of view, noting pilgrims still prayed, kissed the Mausoleum's walls, and practiced rituals despite Soviet suppression. Some took wall fragments as relics, while women placed children against the walls, believing in their spiritual power. He spoke with young people rubbing the Mausoleum's walls and praying. He noted that, despite Soviet anti-religious policies, this tradition endured for generations (Petrash, 1981, 126). Thus, despite attacks and propaganda campaigns against the veneration and pilgrimage to the Yasawi Mausoleum during the Soviet period, pilgrimage to the Mausoleum never ceased.

Archival records show that even during the 1930s Stalinist purges, pilgrimage to the Mausoleum continued. In 1937, a religious figure named Turekhanov, guided kolkhoz pilgrims to Yasawi's tomb and received money (PARK, 708/1/591/49). Because pilgrimage to the Yasawi Mausoleum continued, caretakers upheld their duties. In 1937, mullahs organized prayers there, showing religious practices endured despite Soviet repression (PARK, 708/1/589/29). During the war, pilgrim numbers at the Yasawi Mausoleum grew, and Khoja families sought to regain control over donations. A 1954 document states it was the main income source for Muslim clergy. Despite state control, guards, and restoration efforts, caretaker Rakhym Salakhutdinov, a Khoja descendant, secretly let pilgrims enter the Mausoleum. The nearby registered mosque clashed with him, competing for pilgrim donation revenue (PARK, 708/28/350/42). In 1957, a popular belief held that to fulfill a wish, one must first stay overnight at the Arystan Bab Mausoleum before praying at the Yasawi Mausoleum (TRSA, 1353/2/28/93).

November 13, 1958, document states that in the 1950s, many khoja tribe members, seen as Yasawi's descendants, still served pilgrims despite Soviet restrictions.

Yasawi's descendants and other khoja families welcomed pilgrims and gave blessings despite Soviet restrictions. Though entry was officially banned, pilgrim numbers grew significantly in 1956–1957. Pilgrims from Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics visited the Mausoleum and offered Qurban. Reports show monthly visitors reached 500, doubling during religious holidays. Guards worked in shifts, with one living on-site with his family. Despite restrictions, they often took bribes to let pilgrims enter, sometimes allowing overnight stays. Uzbek chief engineer Babajan Tashbayev, overseeing the Mausoleum's restoration, reported this secret activity to authorities and claimed he personally removed pilgrims. Additionally, Tashbayev reported that some guards, despite brief employment, had built houses. Meanwhile, the state worked to weaken khoja influence and limit pilgrim numbers (PARK, 708/31/265/3-5). Regarding this issue, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) leadership sent a letter to Sh. Ospanov, requesting information from local authorities in Turkestan concerning the guards of the Yasawi Mausoleum on January 11, 1958. The letter stated: "Please inform us about the measures taken by the local authorities of the Turkestan region regarding the guards of the Yasawi Mausoleum" (CSARK, 1711/1/70/9).

Thus, local authorities dismissed the four guards and replaced them with Communist Party members on February 11, 1958 (PARK, 708/31/265/7). These records indicate that in the 1950s, religious leaders and believers around the Mausoleum practiced freely. However, during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign (1959–1964), Soviet repression intensified.

On November 28, 1958, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) issued a decree titled "On Measures to Stop Pilgrimages to So-Called Sacred Sites" (CSARK, 2079/1/117/192) after which strict actions were taken regarding pilgrimages to sacred sites. Mass propaganda targeted sacred sites, including the Yasawi Mausoleum, through periodical publications. In an article published in the journal "Bilim zhane Enbek" (Knowledge and Labor) by the historian T. Aytiev, for example, it was reported that in 1958–1959, around 15,000 people had visited the Mausoleum, generating an income of 6,000 rubles (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1959 was 79,0 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 76 monthly salaries.) for the religious leaders there. Furthermore, he claimed that Yasawi and his Mausoleum had no sacred power and called it merely a beautiful architectural structure in Kazakhstan, devoid of spiritual significance (Aitiev, 1960, 14). This article reflects the Bolshevik regime's atheistic stance toward the Yasawi Mausoleum. However, even during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, pilgrimage persisted. A 1963 CARC report from Shymkent noted that visiting sacred sites showed religious devotion, with the Yasawi Mausoleum remaining a key pilgrimage site for believers from Kazakhstan and Central Asia (CSARK, 1711/1/111/4). However, the Communist Party did not cease its efforts to stop pilgrimages to the Mausoleum. The local authorities continued to carry out "preventive measures" aimed at identifying pilgrims and obstructing their visits. For this purpose, even police officers were assigned to stand guard at the Mausoleum, ensuring tighter control over religious activities and limiting access for pilgrims in 1981 (CSARK, 2079/1/221/348).

Despite Soviet efforts to suppress pilgrimages, the tradition never disappeared, though pilgrim numbers fluctuated. In a 1987 report by the CARC representative, it was stated that the emergence of sacred sites in the region was linked to pre-Islamic pagan practices. It also pointed out that generational traditions (along with "rumors" and legends) sustained believers' faith and devotion and preserved reverence for

sacred sites. Furthermore, the document also noted ongoing research on the history of sacred sites, the persistence of pilgrimage practices, and strategies to stop pilgrimages (CSARK, 2079/1/284/1-2). Scholars and museum staff joined the campaign against sacred sites, giving atheistic lectures at workplaces, farms, and schools to promote anti-religious propaganda and reduce their influence. Overall, scholars and regional museum staff were involved in the campaign against sacred sites. They delivered atheistic lectures on these topics at industrial enterprises, collective farms (kolkhozes), state farms (sovkhozes), and educational institutions, aiming to promote anti-religious propaganda and eliminate the influence of sacred sites on the population.

3. The Attempt to Transform the Mausoleum Into a Museum

Creating atheist corners in mausoleums or converting them into atheist museums was a key Soviet anti-religious tactic. By the late 1920s, major anti-religious museums existed in Moscow and Leningrad. The first Central Asian Specialized Museum of Atheism opened in Tashkent in 1929, playing a key role in the Bolsheviks' suppression of religion. These museums redefined sacred spaces as symbols of "superstition and backwardness," using exhibits to mock religion, spread anti-religious propaganda, and celebrate the "triumph of science over faith". The Republican Museum of Atheism in Kazakhstan was established in January 1935 and was officially opened in May of the same year in Almaty. Plans were made to open a branch of the Almaty Museum of Atheism at the Yasawi Mausoleum in Turkestan in 1939. The planned Anti-Religious Museum in Turkestan was to have six employees. This initiative was part of the Soviet strategy to turn religious landmarks into propaganda tools, undermining sites like the Yasawi Mausoleum (Zholdassuly, 2020, 548-550).

The Soviet authorities saw Turkestan as Central Asia's "center of religious reaction" and aimed to create an Anti-religious museum, targeting the Yasawi Mausoleum. However, converting it into a museum was challenging. Despite these efforts to suppress its religious significance, the deep-rooted spiritual and cultural importance made it difficult to erase its role as a place of pilgrimage and devotion completely among the local population. For example, in a regional party document dated February 9, 1937, it was stated:

Despite the establishment of a special staff of guards appointed by the state to protect the Aziret Sultan Mausoleum as a historical monument and the implementation of several measures to utilize it as a museum, it still lacks the necessary equipment and facilities to function properly as a museum. As a result, it continues to exert a strong influence, attracting large numbers of believers from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Bashkortostan (Politicheskie Repressii, 1998, 35–36).

It underscores Soviet struggles to secularize the Mausoleum, as its deep spiritual significance endured despite state efforts to control it. The document states that the growing number of pilgrims has boosted local religious figures and strengthened the site's influence. It stresses that the mausoleum-turned-museum should serve as a focal point for anti-religious propaganda. It also highlights the need for resources and funding to make it a true cultural center aligned with Soviet ideology.

Sources suggest the Anti-Religious Museum at the Mausoleum operated from 1939 to 1941. Reports also indicate it was later converted into a regional military barracks, reflecting the Soviet practice of repurposing religious sites for state and army use during WWII (Zholdassuly-Baizhanova, 2022, 199). The Bolsheviks paused their anti-religious campaign during WWII, likely shutting down the Anti-Religious

Museum at the Yasawi Mausoleum. Meanwhile, the Yasawi Mausoleum required major restoration, making it unfit as a tourist museum.

During the Khrushchev era, another attempt was made to turn the Yasawi Mausoleum into an atheist museum. The plan followed the CPSU Central Committee's November 28, 1958, resolution, "On measures to stop pilgrimage to so-called sacred sites." The Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan issued a special decision to establish a Republican Museum of the History of Islam and Atheism in the Yasawi Mausoleum on April 12, 1959. After this decision, the Kazakh SSR's Ministry of Culture asked the Council of Ministers to approve a monthly salary of 676 rubles for 10 museum staff and allocate 41,339 rubles for the Museum of the History of Islam and Atheism, set to open in 1963 (PARK, 708/35/1285/18). Subsequently, exhibits and literature were selected, and staff was appointed. The museum was expected to help party and state bodies strengthen scientific and anti-religious propaganda among Muslims (Zholdassuly-Baizhanova, 2022, 200-201).

At the meeting of the Kazakh Communist Party's Propaganda Department, Abdussattarov from South Kazakhstan stated that converting the Yasawi Mausoleum into a historical museum would greatly aid scientific-atheistic propaganda on October 5, 1960. Despite the decision, he complained of delays, unfinished restoration, and lack of landscaping at the Mausoleum. He criticized the Kazakh SSR State Construction Committee (Gosstroy), accusing Vasilevsky and Basenov of neglecting the project despite substantial funding. He noted the issue had persisted since 1953 with no resolution in sight. Additionally, Abdussattarov reported that parts of the Mausoleum were near collapse, with roof leaks, while Gosstroy misused funds on trips and non-essentials. He noted that Dinmukhamed Kunayev, First Secretary of the Kazakh Communist Party, and writers Mukhtar Auezov and Gabit Musrepov were aware of the Mausoleum's condition. He urged the leadership to expedite the Yasawi Mausoleum's restoration and convert it into a hub for atheist propaganda and a historical monument.

As Abdussattarov predicted, restoration delays postponed the museum's opening. Though an atheist museum wasn't established, widespread atheist propaganda in Turkistan targeted pilgrimage to the site. For instance, Atheist lecturer O. Dastanov gave talks to religious believers, citing the Yasawi Mausoleum's construction. He explained how religious figures had "used" it as a religious center for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (PARK, 708/33/1546/48, 53-54). Thus, the atheist museum's opening at the Mausoleum was delayed due to its disrepair and need for extensive restoration. Besides, the lengthy restoration made the Yasawi Mausoleum unsuitable as a museum for distant tourists.

In his response dated March 15, 1962, Deputy Head of Gosstroy T.K. Basenov stated that all interior restoration, except one "small mosque" room, would finish by September 1962. He added that with external work ongoing, visitors could enter through adjacent doors, allowing the museum to open in October 1962 (PARK, 708/35/1285/16). In this regard, in 1962, the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR, in accordance with the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan dated April 12, 1959, decided to open the Museum of the History of Islam and Atheism in the Yasawi Mausoleum starting from January 1, 1963. The museum staff's monthly salary (10 people) was set at 676 rubles, with a total budget of 41,339 rubles. The Ministry of Finance was tasked with managing expenses (PARK, 708/35/1285/19). The museum did not open in 1963, facing ongoing delays. CARC emphasized using the Yasawi Mausoleum to eliminate "religious remnants" by 1965.

Though pilgrimages declined, believers still revered it. Restoration was completed, leaving many renovated rooms vacant. The CARC leadership proposed fully utilizing the Mausoleum to showcase advancements in economy, culture, science, and technology. They recommended transferring it to the Ministry of Culture to establish an atheist historical and local history museum (TRSA, 1353/2/40/41). The Council for Religious Affairs (reorganized from the Council for Religious Cults in 1965) had long sought to repurpose the Yasawi Mausoleum for atheist objectives. Its 1966 report noted that Turkistan remained a hub for religious believers, as the Mausoleum was still revered as a sacred pilgrimage site. The Mausoleum's restoration was incomplete but expected to finish in 1967, prompting preparations for a republican museum. However, scientific-atheistic efforts among believers were weak, with no atheist activities in the Mausoleum. This absence created opportunities for religious leaders to regain influence, as seen in the high number of pilgrims visiting during Muslim holidays (TRSA, 1353/2/39/91). The CRA reports, which alternately claimed the cessation of pilgrimages and a high number of visitors, offered detailed insights into the party's policy on the Mausoleum and the site's religious situation at the time.

Although the museum was not opened, an atheist room was established in the Yasawi Mausoleum in 1967, led by O. Dastanov, the sole atheist writer in South Kazakhstan (TRSA, 1353/2/40/54). Archival records often highlight O. Dastanov's active role in atheist propaganda in Turkistan. For instance, during the Kurban Ait prayer on March 10, 1968, he monitored compliance with Soviet religious laws as part of an auxiliary commission alongside district executive and party committee members. A 1968 CRA document noted that the Turkistan Mosque attracted worshippers from Kazakhstan and Central Asia due to the Mausoleum of the "fanatic Sufi" Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. It attributed the site's continued veneration to incomplete restoration and the absence of a scientific-atheist museum. During the same year's Kurban Ait, pilgrims could not enter the Yasawi Mausoleum as it was enclosed by a two-meter-high fence with locked gates. Worshippers recited the Quran from a distance before departing (TRSA, 1353/2/44/90-91). The 1973 CRA report noted extensive restoration at the Yasawi Mausoleum. It stated that upon completion, a Republican Museum of Atheism would be established and the preparations were already in progress (TRSA, 1353/2/54/14). The records indicate the CRA's interest in establishing an atheist museum at the Mausoleum, though its opening faced repeated delays due to the aforementioned reasons.

Thus, the long-awaited museum at the Mausoleum was finally opened on September 30, 1978. The museum was named the "Republican Museum of the Architectural Complex of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum" (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2617/1). The museum was established by the order of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR on March 28, 1978. The museum's management was engaged in preparatory work, hiring staff, and collecting exhibits until September 30, 1978. Initially, a total of twenty-six employees were hired for the museum, including two research staff members, two tour guides, seven security guards, and others. The museum was financed from the republican budget through the Ministry of Culture of the Kazakh SSR. The grand opening ceremony of the museum took place on September 30, 1978. Responsible officials attended the opening ceremony (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/1364/48). After the officials, the museum's senior staff member, Orynbay Dastanov, delivered a speech, stating: "I have been serving at this monument for over 21 years. During this time, I have authored numerous research articles on the preservation, restoration, and promotion of this heritage. I have introduced the true

essence of the Mausoleum to the public from a scientific perspective". September 30, 1978, fell on a Saturday, and at 11:00 AM, a large crowd gathered for the museum's opening ceremony. After the speeches by the officials, for the first time in many years, people were able to freely enter the Yasawi Mausoleum. The opening of the museum promoted through periodical publications of that time (Ashenov, 1978, 3). Although not officially labeled an atheist museum, its staff's primary duties included scientific-atheistic activities and anti-Sufi propaganda. For example, a reference guide on Sufism was created for museum staff, and Yasawi's folk tales were analyzed from an atheist perspective. Additionally, a seven-member atheist council was established at the museum, alongside a fifteen-member group conducting extensive anti-religious and anti-Sufism propaganda in January 1982 (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2212/5-6).

4. Protection and Promotion of the Mausoleum

In the preceding sections, we examined the discursive and institutional measures aimed at weakening the mausoleum's religious significance. Alongside these measures, the present section analyzes a second, parallel process: efforts to preserve the mausoleum as ahistorical and architectural monument ant to promote it at the state level. In other words, the so-called "Soviet paradox" becomes evident precisely in the simultaneous implementation of these two opposing trajectories. By way of a brief digression, it should be noted that the first restoration works at the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum were carried out during the period of Tsarist Russia. In the early 1870s, discussions arose about demolishing it due to structural concerns, but no action was taken. In 1872, minor restorations began, clearing debris and waste. In 1882, the roof was repaired, wall damage patched, and stones laid around the structure. Buttresses were installed on the western and northern walls for structural reinforcement in 1886 (Ahmet Yassaui Eskertkishi, 1972, 15). Although it is often claimed that no restorations occurred before Tsarist rule, some sources suggest the Yasawi Mausoleum's peshtak (grand entrance portal) was completed under the Bukhara Emirate (CSARK, 1890/3/1432/116). This suggests structural developments and maintenance occurred before Russian rule highlighting the Mausoleum's enduring significance and regional attention.

During the Soviet period, the Yasawi Mausoleum was placed under state protection and underwent extensive restoration. Initial efforts in the late 1920s aimed to prevent structural collapse. In abovementioned Zhusipbek Aimauytov's memoir from early 1929, for example, it is mentioned that the Mausoleum's façade was cracked, the paint had faded, the corners were crumbling and the walls of the qibla side and the minarets were severely damaged, on the verge of collapse (Aimauytov, 2013, 297-298, 300). The Soviet Orientalist scholar M.E. Masson, who conducted research on the Yasawi Mausoleum during those years, in his 1979 interview recalled:

When I saw the Mausoleum before the October Revolution, its walls were severely damaged. At that time, I was afraid it might collapse. That neglected building was only restored and preserved during the Soviet era. This is a remarkable achievement. Until the 1930s, I frequently visited the Hazret Sultan site. Back then, the Mausoleum was under the control of religious authorities, so I did not have the opportunity to manage many artifacts, take measurements, or conduct in-depth research (Alimbaev, 1979, 4).

These records highlight the Mausoleum's critical condition before Soviet-era restoration efforts.

Zhusipbek Aimauytov consulted Leningrad architect N.M. Bachinsky, involved in the restoration. Bachinsky noted a one-meter subsidence of the Mausoleum. That year, with a 10,000-ruble (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1929-1930 was 75 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 133 monthly salaries.) budget, he restored three domes, including the well dome, and eight arches. He reinforced wall and minaret cracks using iron clamps (skoba), crossing two sharpened iron rods bridle-shaped and embedding them deep into the walls. Bachinsky planned to rebuild the collapsing qibla-side walls, reinforce the foundation, whitewash and plaster the interior, remove old fortifications and unnecessary tombstones, and landscape the site with trees. These restoration efforts were conducted under the supervision of the Central Asian Committee for the Protection of Ancient Monuments and Artworks (Sredazkomstaris), not by Kazakh authorities. Architect M.M. Loginov prepared the project's budget estimations (Aimauytov, 2013, 297–298, 301–302).

The Turkestan Committee for the Protection of Ancient Monuments and Artworks (Turkomstaris) organized the first expedition to study the Yasawi Mausoleum in 1922, followed by a second expedition by Sredazkomstaris in 1925. Loginov measured the Mausoleum and prepared budget estimates for restoration. Minor preparatory work began in 1927, but major efforts started in 1928 due to financial constraints, lasting three years. In 1928, 11,000 rubles were allocated, followed by 5,400 rubles in 1929, with the most significant restoration occurring in 1928. Due to financial constraints, the 1928–1930 restoration remained incomplete. The closure of the Leningrad State Restoration Workshop in 1929, where Bachinsky worked, further impeded progress (Yolgin, 2019, 56-59). *The Turkomstaris* organization was established in May 1921 by the leadership of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The national-territorial delimitation (demarkatsiya) carried out between the Central Asian republics in 1924–1925 led to *Turkomstaris* being reorganized as *Sredazkomstaris* in 1925. *Sredazkomstaris* remained active until the end of 1928, after which its functions related to the protection and study of ancient monuments were transferred to *Uzkomstaris* (Lunin, 1990, 38-42).

The subsequent restoration efforts at the Mausoleum continued in 1939–1940 under architect B.N. Zasypkin but were halted with the outbreak of WWII (Ahmet Yassaui Eskertkishi, 1972, 15). Samarkand master and Stalin Prize laureate Kuli Jalilov was also invited to join the 1939 restoration efforts (Bustanov, 2024, 47). The Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR designated all mausoleums as state-protected historical monuments on September 23, 1947. The Architecture Department (a state-level body responsible for coordinating architectural policy and addressing matters of urban planning, design regulations and architectural heritage) under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR was tasked with protecting and restoring these monuments (Zholdassuly-Baizhanova, 2024, 336). A resolution was also issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and the Council of Ministers regarding the restoration of the Yasawi Mausoleum in 1947 (CSARK, 1711/1/111/39). Although adopted in 1947, the resolution led to restoration work on the Yasawi Mausoleum only in 1952, focusing on stabilizing its emergency condition over two decades. The most critical sections underwent partial stabilization, conservation, and restoration, which were successfully completed (CSARK, 1890/3/433/53).

This initiated a prolonged restoration period led by Gosstroy (a state body at the republican level that coordinated construction and architectural affairs, including design, building standards, cost estimates, and technical supervision), but not the Architecture Department of the Kazakh SSR. The Mausoleum's restoration workshop

was in Uzbekistan with Kazakh Gosstroy as the main contractor initially. At first glance, this episode may appear to contradict the logic of governance at the level of the Kazakh SSR. However, republican-level decisions were dependent on departmental hierarchies and interrogational networks in the Soviet Union. Moreover, regarding ancient monuments, the practices established during the period of Turkomstaris/ Sredazkomstaris strengthened the personnel and methodological capacity of institutions in Uzbekistan. Consequently, the transfer of responsibility to a workshop located in another republic can be explained by the concentration of resources and expertise there at the time. However, the project faced delays due to mismanagement of allocated funds, leading to inefficiency and slow progress. For example, in Ospanov's report from January 1964, it was stated that over four million (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1961 was 83,9 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 47 700 monthly salaries) of the five million rubles (approximately 59 600 monthly salaries) allocated for the Mausoleum's restoration had been spent by 1961. However, the work remained incomplete due to fund mismanagement by "fraudsters and embezzlers." The Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR adopted another resolution to complete the restoration work of the Mausoleum in 1961. Following this decision, a special restoration workshop (a specialized unit responsible for organizing restoration work and conducting financial and technical oversight) under Kazakh Gosstroy was established, handling all financial transactions for the Mausoleum's restoration. The State Bank (Gosbank) of Almaty paid Turkistan's workers in cash. Ospanov stated:

In such circumstances, the restoration of the Yasawi Mausoleum will never be completed, and state funds will continue to be embezzled. If we want to establish proper order and daily supervision of the restoration work, the Kazakh SSR Gosstroy workshop (staff of three) should be relocated to Turkistan (CSARK, 1711/1/111/39-40).

Until 1965, the Architecture Department managed Kazakhstan's architectural monuments per the Council of Ministers' 1949 resolution, before transferring responsibility to Gosstroy. On August 30, 1965, the Presidium of the Kazakh SSR Supreme Soviet assigned the Ministry of Culture (a republican ministry responsible for monument registration, protection, and restoration from 1965 onward) responsibility for monument registration, protection, and restoration. The Ministry of Culture planned to establish a cultural monument protection department in January 1966 and a scientific restoration workshop that year, alongside a detailed 1966 restoration plan for the Yasawi Mausoleum (CSARK, 1890/1/2148/63, 73-74).

The Republican Scientific-Restoration Production Workshop (a specialized organization responsible for the scientific restoration of monuments and the execution of restoration work) was established under the Ministry of Culture and began restoration work at the Mausoleum starting from 1966. The final restoration phase was scheduled for 1970–1975 (CSARK, 1890/3/598/4). In his February 8, 1984, report, Minister of Culture Zh. Erkinbekov stated that 4.4 million rubles (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1984 was 184,8 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 23 810 monthly salaries) were allocated for research, design, and restoration at the Yasawi complex, with 3.9 million (approximately 21 104 monthly salaries) spent over 18 years. Between 1966 and 1971, efforts centered on organization, preparation, scientific research, and conservation. The Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR addressed its restoration twice, implementing measures to expedite the process in 1972

and 1977. Following these decisions, a specialized scientific restoration workshop (TSNRM) (a workshop specialized in the scientifically grounded restoration of monuments and the execution of restoration work at the local level) began operating in Turkistan (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2195/23-24).

Thus, Ospanov's January 1964 proposal to relocate the restoration workshop to Turkistan was implemented in 1972. However, financial mismanagement persisted, and workshop leadership changed frequently. For example, The Turkistan restoration workshop had five leaders between 1972 and 1984. O. Omiraliyev (the first head) was sentenced to 12 years in a high-security prison in 1976 for "violating industrial and financial regulations and embezzling state property." His successor, A. Khodjaev, was dismissed after being transferred to the city party committee bureau. N. Meldikhanov was dismissed by city authorities for violating labor discipline and restoration procedures. B. Tuyakbayeva was appointed director of the newly established Kazproektrestavratsiya Institute. Meanwhile, Zh. Alimov was dismissed by Kazrestavratsiya for failing to implement the Ministry of Culture's Collegium decision of March 24, 1982. He was held accountable for failing to address workshop deficiencies (1981–1983) and for severe financial and operational violations (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2195/29-30). Leadership changes, financial mismanagement and procedural violations disrupted continuity and delayed restoration progress.

Since the 1970s, Kazakhstani scholars have conducted interdisciplinary studies at the Mausoleum, integrating archaeology, anthropology, history, linguistics, and architectural restoration, though with some shortcomings (Bustanov, 2024, 51-55). Some scholars criticized the Mausoleum's scientific and restoration work. For instance, L.Yu. Mankovskaya, who studied its architecture and contributed to restoration efforts (1955–1958), criticized the approach to the Mausoleum and stressed its archaeological significance and the need for thorough research and excavation before site leveling. She also criticized the fountain installation, arguing that it was incompatible with the site's natural and historical context (Alimbaev, 1979, 4). Besides, the executives of the Mausoleum criticized the poor-quality restoration by Gosstroy in the 1960s (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2001/76).

The local party leadership often criticized the Mausoleum restoration workshop. A 1979 city party committee document stated it repeatedly failed to meet planned objectives. The report stated that the restoration workshop used only 261,000 of the 361,000 rubles (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1976 was 154,2 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 2341 monthly salaries.) allocated for 1976. The workshop spent 272,700 rubles of 300,000 in 1977 and 305,000 rubles of 514,000 in 1978. The report criticized A. Khodjaev for ineffective management, failure to enforce labor regulations, and lack of production discipline, among other issues (CSARK, 1890/3/1432/14).

Eventually, the museum, initially planned for 1963, was inaugurated 15 years later in 1978. However, it was founded as an architectural museum rather than an atheist one. Despite the museum's inauguration, restoration work on the Mausoleum persisted. Efforts to promote and popularize the Mausoleum accompanied the restoration work under party directives. As one of the Soviet Union's most renowned historical monuments, preserving the Yasawi Mausoleum enhanced the regime's external image. The Bolsheviks recognized that naming it an atheist museum would harm the Soviet image. However, despite its official designation, atheist propaganda remained a key function. Additionally, the Deputy Minister of Culture U. Sadykova requested permission from Sh.R. Eleukenov, the Chairman of the State Committee for

Press under the Council of Ministers, to publish a two-print-sheet booklet titled "Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum" through the Kazakhstan publishing house on November 23, 1971. Initiatives such as booklet publication contributed not only to monument preservation but also to the projection of a positive image of Soviet authority to external audiences through the display of heritage protection in Kazakhstan (CSARK, 1890/3/128/98). In addition, architectural structures and historical monuments that were venerated by religious communities and regarded as sacred pilgrimage sites were registered and protected not only by the Ministry of Culture of the Kazakh SSR but also by the Society for the Protection of Monuments (an organization responsible for organizing the inventory, registration, and community-based protection of monuments), an organization established in 1971 (Zholdassuly, 2023, 293).

The Ministry of Culture's August 1974 report noted an annual allocation of 582,000 rubles (The average monthly wage in the USSR in 1974 was 141,1 rubles, this amount was equivalent to approximately 4125 monthly salaries.) for monument registration, protection, restoration, and promotion in Kazakhstan. Of this amount, 350,000 rubles were consistently allocated to the Yasawi monument (CSARK, 1890/3/598/50). The Minister of Culture's January 12, 1976, report stated that of the 776,000 rubles allocated for monument restoration and research in the Kazakh SSR, 351,000 rubles were designated for the Mausoleum. The document outlined plans to open an architectural museum in the Mausoleum by 1977. The state prioritized the site, with the Ministry preparing the exhibition and promoting the monument. Orders were placed with "Avrora" in Leningrad and "Zhazushy" in Almaty to publish an album on the Yasawi Mausoleum, with a booklet planned for 1976. Additionally, a plan was devised to produce souvenirs at the Turkistan restoration workshop (CSARK, 1890/3/944/2-3). Mass media actively promoted the Yasawi Mausoleum and its museum. In 1984, "Kazakhfilm" and "Lenfilm" produced promotional films at the museum administration's request, which were shown not only within the Soviet Union but also internationally. These films were broadcast multiple times on television. Thus, documentation relating to the 1984 films explicitly noted that they were intended for screening abroad as well (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2212/10). More broadly, foreign tourism, organized through Intourist, was regarded by the authorities as an instrument for shaping a favorable image of the "Land of the Soviets" among foreign visitors and promoting it internationally. In this context, excursions designed for foreign tourists were framed as forms of "informational and propaganda work," and their itineraries deliberately included historical and cultural monuments, including traditional sites dating back to the pre-revolutionary period (Orlov-Popov, 2021, 184-225). The promotion of this monument was one of the main activities of the Yasawi Museum. The museum planned to publish brochures, booklets and postcards about the Mausoleum, as well as to author a book on the history of the development of the city of Turkistan in 1988–1989 (CSARK, 1890/3 cont/2809/5). Soon after, the Soviet Union dissolved. Thus, alongside measures aimed at protecting and promoting the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum, efforts also emerged to eliminate its religious significance and halt pilgrimage by believers. Although pilgrimage declined sharply at certain times, it was never fully eradicated; under conditions of museification, it was often camouflaged as a "museum visit."

Conclusion

The Bolsheviks' stance on the Yasawi Mausoleum mirrored their broader policy on sacred sites and historical monuments. In Soviet Kazakhstan, communists sought to abolish centuries-old traditions and erase religious significance from sacred sites, restructuring society through atheistic policies, particularly from the 1930s onward. The Mausoleum was a key target of atheist policies, with minor research and restoration conducted in the late 1920s. In 1930, the khojas lost custodianship of it, which was transferred to state ownership. The Bolsheviks aimed to reduce its religious significance, long revered as the "Second Mecca" and a major pilgrimage site. In the late 1930s, plans for an atheist museum at the Yasawi Mausoleum were approved but halted during the war. After the war, the state designated it as a historical monument and initiated extensive restoration from the 1950s. Despite atheist policies and the 1950s plan to convert it into an atheist museum, it remained a revered pilgrimage site, with visits declining at times but never ceasing entirely. Eventually, a museum opened at the Mausoleum in the late 1970s, nearly 20 years after the decision, but not as an atheist museum as initially planned. Although not officially named an atheist museum, promoting atheist propaganda against Sufism and sacred sites was its primary function.

Notably, the Soviet government prevented the Mausoleum from collapsing. Given its historical and cultural significance, the Soviet authorities carried out decades-long preservation and restoration efforts. Despite shortcomings, restoration efforts rescued it from an emergency state. Alongside restoration, the Bolsheviks also promoted it. Thus, the Bolsheviks aimed to showcase the Soviet Union's preservation of sacred sites as historical monuments to other countries. Additionally, multidisciplinary research was conducted at the Mausoleum with contributions from various scholars. After completing scientific and restoration work, the museum opened, and the Mausoleum was established as a major tourist center. However, determining the percentage of visitors as tourists versus pilgrims remains challenging. When these four trajectories are considered together, and when "destruction" is understood not as the physical demolition of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi Mausoleum but as an atheistic policy aimed at the fundamental erosion of its sacred status, the "Soviet paradox" referenced in the article's title becomes more clearly visible. While the authorities sought to weaken the mausoleum's function as a religious site, to halt pilgrimage altogether, and to reinterpret it symbolically through museification, they simultaneously pursued its preservation and restoration as a historical and architectural monument and actively promoted it as cultural heritage. Thus, the issue was not a choice between the mausoleum's complete destruction and its full preservation, but rather the pragmatic, simultaneous pursuit of two objectives: limiting its religious influence while safeguarding its historical and cultural capital. The Bolsheviks' decisions and actions towards the Mausoleum were paradoxical. While the State attempted to erase the site's religious significance, it simultaneously sought to preserve it for its historical and architectural value. This underscores the need to recognize the Mausoleum's spiritual significance and preserve it as a historical heritage.

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