

## Germans in Kazakhstan's Virgin Lands: Religious Assimilation/Segregation in the Atheistic Society (1950s–1960s)

Zhanna Sabitbekovna Mazhitova<sup>1</sup>  
*Astana Medical University, Astana, Kazakhstan*

**Abstract:** The article examines the issues of religious assimilation and/or attempted segregation of the German population in the context of the intensified anti-religious policies of the Khrushchev era. The German population arrived in Kazakhstan in an organized manner in the 19th century. During that period, as well as in the early Soviet era, the German population managed to preserve its religious identity, which served as a powerful unifying force under the conditions of “militant atheism”. However, in the 1950s-60s, northern Kazakhstan became not only a region where, because of the Virgin Lands campaign, a multi-ethnic society was formed, but also a place where strict anti-religious state policies were implemented. The decisive and prohibitive stance of the Soviet authorities toward religious institutions significantly hindered Germans from fully adhering to their religious principles. This was particularly true for smaller religious communities such as Baptists, Mennonites, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who faced pressure not only from the Soviet authorities but also from larger religious groups. As a result, we are observing a latent process of assimilation of certain communities (such as the Molokans and Sabbatarian Pentecostal communities) into larger religious associations. Based on an analysis of both registered and unregistered religious associations and archival documents, it can be concluded that, due to Soviet religious policies, the scope of religious practices contracted significantly during this period. At the same time, the examination of confidential reports from commissioners of the Council for Religious Affairs in northern Kazakhstan reveals the diverse adaptations of religious practices among the German population.

**Keywords:** Virgin Lands-era Kazakhstan, Germans, religiosity, assimilation, segregation

In contemporary historiography on the religious transformation of ethnic groups in the USSR, considerable attention is devoted to the need to analyze the local contexts in which the state's anti-religious campaign assumed different forms (Antonov, 2022; Elsner, 2023; Horsfjord, 2024; Rohozinski, 2024; Sibgatullina, 2024; Silano, 2023; Stoeckl, 2020). Despite several theoretical and methodological studies on the ethnic groups of Kazakhstan, the religious assimilation and segregation of Germans within the atheist Soviet society remains insufficiently explored, which underscores the relevance of the present research.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor of the Department of Social and Humanitarian Sciences “Astana Medical University”, Astana, Kazakhstan. E-mail: zhanna013013@gmail.com

Examining these developments today enables scholars not only to investigate the historical forms of religious transformation within German Protestant communities, but also to better understand the contemporary challenges of religious identity among Kazakhstan's national minorities. This study shows how a unique sociocultural situation could emerge at the intersection of pervasive atheization, ideological pressure, and ethnoconfessional distinctiveness – one in which religious identity did not disappear but was instead transformed, often in defiance of official policy.

The central question addressed in this article concerns the forms of religious practice that German Protestant denominations managed to preserve under Soviet conditions. The study explores how the anti-religious policies of the 1950s-60s reshaped the confessional identity of Protestant communities. Attention is devoted to identifying the factors and patterns of variation in religious practices that influenced the structure of religious life. This analysis helps clarify how German Protestants sought to develop a religious framework for everyday life to safeguard the rights and future of their community.

When examining the religious transformation of German communities in Kazakhstan during the 1950s-60s, it is essential to consider the broader historical context: the Virgin Lands Campaign as a large-scale socio-economic project, and the Soviet state's attitude toward ethnic minorities, including the German population, which had settled in Kazakhstan long before these events. These processes – the Virgin Lands Campaign and the difficult fate of the German population – intersected at the levels of state ideology, ethnic policy, and population management practices.

The German population arrived in the Kazakh steppe both through organized settlement and spontaneous migration at the end of the 18th century, during the period of the Russian Empire's expanding presence in the southeastern regions. After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, the flow of immigrants to the Kazakh region increased, enabling the formation of large economic communities that maintained traditional cultural values and a strong ethnic identity.

According to the First General Population Census of the Russian Empire in 1897, in the Akmola region (the administrative center of northern Kazakhstan – author's note), the German population adhered to the following religious affiliations: Orthodoxy (0.5% of men and 0.8% of women), Catholicism (1.1% and 1.5%), and Protestantism (98.4% and 97.7%), respectively (Trojnickii, 1904, p. VI). Thus, most Germans belonged to Protestant denominations. It is important to note that, based on reports from Commissioners of the Council for Religious Cults (USDRK) and other state bodies, a wide range of Christian denominations were prevalent within German communities. These included Lutheranism, Mennonitism, Baptism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventism, and others. This religious diversity enabled the fulfillment of spiritual needs through various forms of worship both during the pre-revolutionary period and in the early decades of Soviet rule (Auanasova, 2007; Baltabayeva, 2008; Kaziyev, 2015).

After the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War, approximately one million Germans were forcibly resettled from the Volga region, Ukraine, and the Caucasus to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia. This practice became a hallmark of the Soviet leadership's national policy. Declared "unreliable" (Kaziyev, 2015), these individuals were subjected to a special regime that included curfews, labor mobilization, and restrictions on civil rights. During this period, the state's relationship with religious minorities began to "warm", showing signs of relative easing.

In the post-war period, especially after 1955, even as the formal lifting of restrictions began, Germans continued to be regarded as incomplete Soviet citizens. Their ethnicity aroused suspicion, and their cultural and religious life remained under strict state control. Many of them, including descendants of the first German settlers who had been conscripted into labor armies, were either forcibly relocated or voluntarily sent to participate in the development of the Virgin Lands in Kazakhstan. As of December 10, 19including special settlers were registered in the

Akmola region alone, including Chechens and Ingush – 21,860; Balkars – 1,685; Germans – 43,533; Poles – 4,171; OUN members (Ukrainians) – 136; others – 132 (State Archive of the Akmola Region, 1954). From this point onward, one can speak of the emergence of a policy of “re-education” of special settlers, including encompassing political, social, and religious aspects, aimed at their reintegration into “normal life”.

However, the real attitude toward the Germans remained one of suspicion, as they continued to be viewed as potential “enemy agents”, particularly because of their Protestant affiliation, which Soviet authorities associated with “foreign influence”.

## Literature Review

The Soviet state’s policy toward the German population has repeatedly been the subject of scholarly research. Scholars have shown particular interest in the history of the Germans’ arrival, their everyday life, deportation, service in the labor army, and adaptation in the locations of special settlements (*spetsposeleniya*). However, the religious life of the German population in northern Kazakhstan during the Khrushchev era (1950s-60s) remains largely on the periphery of academic attention.

The period from the 1960s to the 1990s was marked by a growing interest among researchers in reinterpreting the history of Soviet atheism and the specific character of anti-religious policy. In this context, it is important to highlight the foundational works of A.A. Bennigsen, who demonstrated how, within the framework of the Soviet modernization project, the authorities aimed to eliminate not only class distinctions but also cultural and confessional differences (Bennigsen, 1961; 1970; 1983). It was during this time that the first substantial and comprehensive studies by prominent scholars of religion (Addai-Mununkum, 2018; Gorbatov, 2008; Krieger, 1993). These scholars focused on the 1941 deportations, the postwar process of social rehabilitation, and the discursive analysis of state-religion relations, employing new theoretical and methodological approaches.

Among the classic works in the field are those by Shkarovskii (1999) and Chumachenko (1999), which examine the full spectrum of anti-religious measures: from the closure of churches to the arrests of clergy and the establishment of the institution of Commissioners for Religious Affairs. A significant contribution to understanding the Virgin Lands Campaign as a period of intensified anti-religious consolidation was made by Soskovets. In his works, he presents anti-religious practices as a fundamental subsystem of the Soviet political order, possessing its own internal structure and developmental logic (Soskovets, 2005; 2013). This perspective is also supported by other scholars (Farkhutdinov, 2019; Goncharenko, 2015; Nikiforov, 2009; Odintsov, 2014; Smolkin, 2009).

An important area of research is the study of illegal or semi-underground religious communities during the Soviet era. One of the leading specialists in this field is M. Bourdeaux (Bourdeaux, 1968), whose ideas about the resilience of Protestant groups such as Lutherans, Baptists, and Mennonites, among whom Germans made up a significant proportion, were further developed in the works of Krotov (2019). These studies shed light on forms of “hidden religiosity”, expressed through family rituals, the transmission of faith outside official institutions, and *samizdat* religious literature.

To understand the specific character of the Khrushchev era, the works of P. Froese are particularly valuable, especially his monograph “The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization”, which examines the state’s attempt to eradicate religiosity as a social institution. In his research, P. Froese aims to draw readers’ attention to key paradoxes: despite state repression, religion persisted as an element of cultural identity, particularly within closed and ethnically homogeneous communities, such as those in Germany (Froese, 2008). It

should be noted that Kazakhstan was often considered solely as a geographical background in these studies, without a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of regional specifics.

A substantial contribution to the historical understanding of theoretical and methodological issues in state–religion relations has been made by several scholars, whose research highlights the multiple trajectories of Protestant communities' development throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Strukova & Filatov, 2003; Suchkova, 2018). In recent years, a growing number of studies have emerged in Kazakhstan dedicated to the history of ethnic minorities. These works focus on life strategies of adaptation and survival under Soviet policy, but the issues of German religiosity are addressed only fragmentarily (Auanasova, 2007; Kazyev, 2015; Saktaganova et al., 2018).

Among the works of contemporary authors that directly examine the religious life of the German population, special attention should be given to the studies of Burghart (1997; 1999; 2001a; 2001b) and Mazhitova et al. (2022). These works explore the formation of German religious communities, their interactions with state authorities, and the specific dynamics of interdenominational relations, drawing on previously unknown archival sources and oral history data.

Despite the historiography's accumulated experience in examining various aspects of the religious life of Protestant communities, a significant gap remains in the comprehensive analysis of Protestant denominations in the specific context of Virgin Lands Kazakhstan during the 1950s–60s. This study addresses that gap by reconstructing the everyday strategies of small religious communities of Baptists, Mennonites, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other groups, tracing the deeper mechanisms by which their identities were transformed under the pressure of state ideology.

The findings clarify the argument advanced by Bourdeaux (1968) and Krotov (2019) concerning the phenomenon of “hidden religiosity,” demonstrating that, in the conditions of Virgin Lands Kazakhstan, it assumed a particular form – a “household religious network.” This network compensated for the absence of officially registered religious institutions, as confirmed by archival documents introduced in the study. The results also broaden the contours of the Soviet secularization model proposed by Froese (2008) and Liu & Froese (2020), showing that religion not only persisted but also became an element of ethnic identity. The mechanisms of assimilation and, to some extent, segregation identified in the research ( ) such as the shift toward family-based rituals, external isolation, and informal leadership – indicate that religious practices display a high degree of adaptability under restrictive conditions. Thus, the study demonstrates both the resilience of minority religious life and its distinctly regional character in the context of Virgin Lands Kazakhstan.

Future research could expand the analysis of gendered dimensions of religious practice, as women undoubtedly played a major role in preserving religious traditions. Promising directions also include applying interdisciplinary methods from visual anthropology and digital historical cartography, which would allow for a more comprehensive reconstruction of identity-preservation mechanisms under late Soviet modernization and open new possibilities for further inquiry (Naizabayeva et al., 2022).

## **Case and Methodology**

The article is based on the author's use of historical-descriptive, comparative-historical, and cultural-anthropological approaches, as well as the principles of microhistory and oral history. This methodological framework enabled the verification of sources, the integration of little-known and previously unknown data on the religious everyday life of Germans in their internal interrelations, and the reconstruction of the picture of religious transformation at the intersection of ideology, everyday practices, and identity. In addition, the article employs

historical-descriptive and cultural-anthropological approaches, which made it possible not only to reconstruct specific facts and events related to the religious life of Germans in the 1950s-60s in the northern regions of the Virgin Lands of Kazakhstan, but also to analyze religiosity as a practice of everyday life. In this context, the analysis encompassed not only the institutional forms of small religious communities but also family rituals, the symbolic transmission of faith, ceremonial practices, and attitudes toward death, marriage, birth, and initiation.

In the article, the author used diverse materials from the archives of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan. First, the article is based on materials from regional archives: the state archives of the cities of Astana, Petropavlovsk, Pavlodar and Kokshetau. These archives contain materials that allow for the study of the practical activities of both registered and unregistered religious associations. The analysis of classified reports from regional and central USDRK in the northern regions of Kazakhstan; instructional letters and recommendations from central authorities to local executive bodies on religious matters; letters and complaints from believers; materials from Commissions for Monitoring the Observance of Legislation on Religious Cults under district executive committees and party organs of the Virgin Lands Territory from the 1950s-60s; and reports by teachers and members of the public on visits to religious gatherings – all together made it possible to reveal the variability of religious practices among the German population.

In addition, in the study, the author relied on unknown archival sources identified in the central archives of the Russian Federation (the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, the Russian State Archive of Modern History and the Russian State Archive of Scientific and Technical Documentation) and the Republic of Kazakhstan (the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan). These materials combined to illustrate the features of the anti-religious campaign against ethnic minorities during the Khrushchev decade. This study was approved by the Local Bioethics Committee of Astana Medical University (No. 4, May 13, 2025, Astana, Kazakhstan) and was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

### **Virgin Land Campaign as an Anti-religious Project**

The Virgin Lands Campaign (1954-64), launched by First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Nikita S. Khrushchev at the February-March Plenum of the CPSU Central Committee in 1954, aimed to address the acute grain shortage by dramatically increasing the sown area through the large-scale cultivation of virgin and fallow lands. The campaign prioritized grain production, particularly in the northern regions of the Kazakh SSR, which included the Akmola (since 1961, Tselinograd region), Kokchetav, North Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, and Kustanay regions. Justifying the importance and feasibility of developing the Virgin Lands, N.S. Khrushchev emphasized that it was necessary “to rapidly advance those branches of agriculture that are of vital importance to the country. First, we are talking about increasing grain production. The level of grain production crucially determines the development of all other branches of agriculture” (Russian State Archive of Modern History (1954).

The campaign was not only an economic, but also a demographic, ideological, and cultural project: during the decade, hundreds of thousands of citizens, mostly from the RSFSR, Ukraine, and Belarus, migrated to Kazakhstan en masse. According to experts, almost 2.9 million people arrived in the Kazakh SSR during these years (Zhumasultanov, 2013, p. 66).

This process was accompanied by the active mobilization of personnel from various professions, the construction of infrastructure, the establishment of new state farms and towns, as well as the voluntary and forced resettlement of workers, among whom a significant portion were previously deported ethnic groups, including Germans. The Soviet Union was in dire need

of grain products, so although the campaign was officially positioned as voluntary and heroic, in practice it was accompanied by strict labor discipline, acute shortage of resources, domestic difficulties, and ideological pressure.

The “general idea” of the Virgin Lands campaign was to construct an image of a “new Soviet space” – modern, industrious, internationalist, and, perhaps most importantly, atheistic. Within this ideological framework, religion was portrayed as a relic of the past, while ethnic identity was considered secondary to socialist affiliation. According to the Soviet leadership, as society advanced toward communism, the population’s need for religion, regarded as a secondary social construct, was expected to gradually disappear, including through active efforts to suppress it. “Religious prejudices and superstitions still poison the consciousness of some Soviet people, preventing them from actively participating in the construction of communism in our country. Religious prejudices, preserved in people’s minds by force of habit [...] and by virtue of tradition passed down from the older generation to the younger, do not and cannot die out by themselves, and a relentless, persistent, and daily struggle must be waged against them” (Russian State Archive of Modern History, 1955).

Until the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union experienced a brief period of liberalization, which also extended to the religious sphere. During this time, certain religious rights were partially restored: some faiths regained limited recognition, religious communities were officially registered, and amnesty were granted. However, beginning in the mid-1950s, this liberal trend was reversed, giving way to a new wave of intense anti-religious campaigns. These efforts took on not only a systematic but also a permanent character. It was during this period that N.S. Khrushchev, in a conversation with a French delegation, stated: “We continue to be atheists. And we will strive to free an even greater number of people from the religious delusion” (Shkarovskii, 1999, p. 357). Unlike the Stalinist era, which was marked by direct and often violent repression, Khrushchev’s approach relied on the “scientific and cultural displacement” of religion through ideological indoctrination, public education, and the broad discrediting of religious practices.

To this end, the activities of both registered and unregistered religious associations, houses of prayer, preachers, and “unauthorized” clergy came under the scrutiny of state and party authorities. Attention was directed toward Protestant denominations, such as Lutherans, Evangelical Christians-Baptists, Pentecostals, Molokans, Subbotniks, Mennonites, and Adventists, due to their characteristic Protestant independence and distinctiveness. In its struggle against them, the Soviet authorities expanded the powers of the Council for Religious Affairs, launched campaigns promoting scientific atheism through schools, clubs, cinemas, and the press, and imposed bans on believers performing religious rites outside officially registered institutions. A crucial role in collecting information on the activities and alleged violations of Protestant communities was assigned to the USDRK. As noted by the USDRK in the North Kazakhstan region, V. Lyapunov: “Further monitoring of the development of the religious movement among the German population of the region will be the subject of my special attention” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

It is worth noting that these measures were carried out most intensively in Kazakhstan: in 1958-64, the number of active prayer houses decreased by more than half (Saktaganova, 2018). This category also includes the German Protestant communities, which often operated without official registration and became the focus of heightened attention from the authorities.

### **Protestant Communities of Germans**

The main instrument of control over religious life in northern Kazakhstan was the regional Commissioners of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Regional Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR. Authorized representatives of this

body-maintained records of both registered and unregistered religious associations, monitored the content of sermons, intervened in internal personnel decisions within communities, limited the number of “clergies”, and effectively obstructed the registration of Protestant congregations. The overarching theme in most of the reports was the notion that the formation and activities of Protestant communities were associated with conflict and posed a threat to Soviet society.

By 1956, there were 480,397 people of German nationality living in Kazakhstan (Bailin, 2010). Despite the external Soviet infrastructure (school, cultural center, party committee), the internal life of these villages retained elements of ethno-confessional insularity. These communities adhered to unwritten rules: not to marry outsiders or “non-believers”; not to speak about their faith with “strangers”; and to avoid excessive openness in interactions with the authorities. This contributed to the formation of a semi-closed community with a distinct system of trust and social solidarity, while at the same time reinforcing a sense of alienation from the outside world.

It should be noted that in northern Kazakhstan, alongside the prominence of Catholic worship among the believing segment of the German population (see more in Mazhitova et al., 2022), the Protestant movement experienced significant development. The German communities resettled in the Virgin Lands of Kazakhstan during the 1950s-60s, continuing the cultural traditions of their ancestors, came to belong predominantly to Protestant denominations, such as Lutherans, Mennonites, Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ECB), Pentecostals, Sabbatarian Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and other confessions.

Judging by the memoranda and reports of the Commissioners of the Council in the Virgin Lands Territory, the religious life of Protestant communities, most of which were not officially registered with the authorized body, was active. For example, in the administrative center of the North Kazakhstan Region, the city of Petropavlovsk, during the 1960s, there were two Pentecostal groups, one Seventh-day Adventist group, one Baptist group, and a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses active (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1967). As noted in one of the memoranda from the Council’s Commissioners: “The growth of sectarianism is occurring almost exclusively at the expense of the region’s German population” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

Germans mobilized for the development of the Virgin Lands often lived in compact settlements, so-called “German villages” (ethnic German rural settlements), which formed distinct confessional and ethnic enclaves within the multiethnic structure of the Virgin Lands Territory. Such settlements as, for example, “Peterfeld” and “Karagandinskoye” in the North Kazakhstan region, “Yefremovka” and “Maykain” in the Pavlodar region, “Novoselovka” and “Tselinnoye” in the Tselinograd region, “Davydovka”, “Valentinovka” in the Kostanay region, “Kellerovka” and “Pokrovka” in the Kokchetav Region were either fully or partially populated by German families.

**Figure 1***Baptist House of Prayer in Bulayevo, 1956.*

Routinely repeated practices by the entire community, morning and evening prayer, fasting, Easter meals, Baptist baptism in river water, singing a psalm on one's birthday, collective celebration of Harvest Day, Pentecost (Trinity), and other occasions, even if carried out in fragmented form and under the close watch of state authorities, served to maintain a connection with the land of origin and became, in essence, a ritualized struggle for ethnic survival. "In the registered Evangelical Christian-Baptist community of Petropavlovsk, it is customary to perform water baptism for new church members once a year, with the event timed to coincide with the celebration of the religious holiday of Pentecost. This practice has been carried out in the community for some years (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955). This is quite consistent with the theory of "memory through practice" (Connerton, 1989), in which belonging to culture in the broadest sense of the word is determined through repeated ritual actions.

Protestant denominations, as a rule, historically relied on a decentralized structure, home gatherings, and intra-communal Bible reading, which made them, on the one hand, more independent and stable in the face of persecution, and, on the other, especially vulnerable to the Soviet government, which sought to suppress any uncontrolled spiritual activity of believers.

Among all Protestant denominations in Virgin Lands-era Kazakhstan, Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, launched in 1958, had a particularly severe impact on Protestant communities. While Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims were able to maintain officially registered parishes, the German Protestant communities, except for a few cases such as in Tselinograd and Petropavlovsk, were largely marginalized and relegated to a religious and social ghetto (State Archive of Astana, n.d.-e, n.d.-f, n.d.-g, n.d.-h, n.d.-i).

According to statistics found in archival documents, the German population, despite persistent atheistic propaganda, managed to preserve and even develop their cultural and religious traditions (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Comparisons of Prayer House Attendance on Easter Days*

Prayer Meeting Days	1955	1956	1957
Morning of the 1st day of “Easter”	200-220	340	300
The evening of the 1st day of “Easter”	200	270	320
Morning of the 2nd day of “Easter”	150	150	200
The evening of the 2nd day of “Easter”	170	200	250

Data on attendance at the ECB prayer house in the Petropavlovsk community during Easter services indicates a steady increase in the number of worshippers over time. As noted in one report: “The religiosity observed over the past two or three years has increased among the religious population in almost all cults” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

However, this trend was not consistent across all regions of northern Kazakhstan. For instance, in the German communities of the Pavlodar Region, there was a gradual decline in religious activity among believers (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Information on Registered Societies of the Pavlodar Region as of December 25*

Names of religious cults and communities (groups) of the region	Date of Community Establishment	Number of believers			Annual income of the community		
		1958	1959	1960	As of 1958	As of 1959	As of 1960
ECB	1956	194	175	172	32200	31200	29800
Nativity Prayer House	1945	5000	5000	4400	250000	307000	195200
Kazakh Mosque	1946	500	400	400	255000	251000	210000

It would be an inexcusable distortion to assert that life in the German Protestant communities unfolded peacefully and in strict observance of all religious canons. In fact, latent processes of segregation and assimilation took place in them, invisible at first glance, but significantly affecting the form, content, activity, and development of communities.

**Segregation and Cultural Isolation: Germans as a Religious Minority in Virgin Lands Kazakhstan**

The cultural and religious isolation of German communities in the context of Virgin Lands-era Kazakhstan during the 1950s and 1960s is a complex and contested phenomenon. On the one hand, it can be viewed as the result of external pressure from the Soviet ideological and administrative system, which systematically pushed the German population to the margins of socio-cultural life. On the other hand, it also functioned as a deliberate mechanism of self-preservation, driven by internal, communal attitudes that favored ethnic and confessional isolation as a means of protecting against assimilation and the loss of identity.

Religious segregation in this context is not limited to its territorial or legal form, but encompasses a holistic socio-cultural experience, from everyday practices to linguistic and gender-based survival strategies. The Germans of the Virgin Land region lived in a space where

their religiosity both made them vulnerable and kept them from completely dissolving into the Soviet universe.

The Soviet government consistently shaped the image of a religious person as a “backward”, “underdeveloped” subject, incapable of scientific thinking and socialist morality. In newspapers, school essays, and speeches at meetings, religious people were portrayed as “sectarian”, “superstitious”, “ridiculous”, or “shameful”.

In this context, ethnic German Protestants were perceived by the public as falling into a category of double marginalization: they were seen as foreigners (due to their origin and language) and as enemies of progress (due to their religiosity). As a result, social stigmatization has institutional consequences.

On the one hand, the Soviet authorities sought to support non-religious Germans by creating specific conditions and offering certain privileges. For example, “The overwhelming majority [of Germans] were engaged in socially useful labor, had access to housing, and owned livestock and poultry. Many of them were production leaders: 57 Germans were elected as chairmen of collective farms, 1,895 served as fieldwork and tractor brigade leaders, and 497 held positions as heads of livestock farms (Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan [AP RK]), fond 708, opis 29, delo 140, list 17).

At the same time, the proportion of religious Germans holding leadership positions in the Komsomol and the Communist Party was extremely low, effectively isolating them from opportunities for career advancement. One of the most important phenomena of the period under review is the privatization of religious practice, the transition from public church life to a purely private and domestic one. Some religious activists led a double life – working in party structures during the day and praying at home at night. Such ambiguity gave rise to an ethically tense yet resilient form of religiosity that may be described as cryptoreligiosity – faith without institutional expression, preserved as an intimate act of inner resistance. The author found only one archival document about the activities of the director of the state farm “Veselaya Roscha” of the Pavlodar region, the son of an actively preaching Baptist (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-d). Thus, German believers formed a marginal consciousness of members of Soviet society, being alien to the basic ideals of Soviet ideology.

The result of the above was the internalization of a secondary status: even within German communities, there gradually emerged a sense of inferiority, shame associated with faith, and the perceived necessity of silence. Religious topics were strictly forbidden to be discussed in public places, at school, or even with neighbors. Children often did not know that they belonged to a family of believers. Baptisms, weddings, and even funerals could be conducted in non-Protestant forms yet accompanied by covert religious rituals. For instance, Forgiveness Sunday was substituted with a so-called family evening. Families avoided friendship with non-believers, restricted their participation in public life (although they could formally be registered in trade unions and the Komsomol), refused to participate in holidays considered pagan or “anti-Christian”, such as New Year, May 1, etc. (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, 1964).

This represents a classic manifestation of structural discrimination, whereby a minority adapts to the dominant order at the cost of self-suppression, social segregation, and a closed religious subjectivity marked by fear, moral fortitude, and emotional strain.

The isolation had another important consequence – internal polarization within the German communities themselves, when there was a fine line between the state, when the older generation sought to preserve religious norms and customs, and when young people, gradually socializing in Soviet schools, inevitably came into conflict between family identity and the dominant ideology. According to Janke Ewalad, the oldest member of the Adventist group: “The youth is gradually moving away from them. The connection between the sect and the youth remained purely formal” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). Also:

A psychosocial fault line was emerging, which in some cases led to a generation gap. I, a former Mennonite sectarian, like all our Soviet youth, had fun, sang, and went to the movies. But after falling into the clutches of Mantler [the community's presbyter – Zh. M.] and his gang, through my own recklessness and under their influence, I cut myself off from everything and lived solely with dreams of the afterlife. Only my current comrades helped me get out of this routine. I curse Mantler and demand that he be punished. (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-a)

The author of the words is a young man from the Uritsky collective farm. Nickel openly shows that, being a “former” believer, he sees the reason for his “delusions” not in himself, but in the adult Presbyter Mantler

Young people often consciously renounced their faith to avoid stigmatization and build a successful life: they joined the Komsomol, entered universities, and married non-believers. Thus, there was a deviation from the faith, “which was unshakably observed until recently, which arose as a result of a certain weakening of religious feeling among the new generation, who did not attach the exceptional importance to certain requirements of their religion that their ancestors recognized and fanatically observed” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). Parents perceived it as betrayal, children – as liberation. These conflicts, preserved in oral memory, are still a sore point in the post-Soviet narrative of Kazakhstani Germans.

At the same time, we can cite the opposite examples, when “new” youth religious groups arose under the influence of the sermons of visiting missionaries and strong ties with a local religious group. Thus, in the city of Pavlodar in 1963, a charismatic youth group of “initiativists” emerged, numbering around 40–45 members, and for a long time became the subject of official reports submitted by Council representatives. The new generation of believers was convinced of the possibility of praising God in any way. Members of this group held “gatherings in private homes, traveled outside the city, where they studied the Bible, staged religious games and dramatizations, recruited new people, and carried out other antisocial reactionary work” (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-b). They raised all members of their group in a spirit of hostility to the laws governing the activities of religious societies, created a children's group, a children's choir, and encouraged children to leave the pioneers, not study the history of the USSR in schools, and others.

Religious Germans often perceived Soviet culture not just as hostile, but as alien and symbolically polluted. For example, participants in an ECB meeting of up to 400 people in the village of Nadarovka, Pavlodar region, refused the demands of police officers to disperse and even tried to physically resist (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-b). A dualistic worldview formed in their consciousness: “their own” – believers, modest, honest, and hardworking; and “the others” – non-believers, drunken, promiscuous, and cruel. Parents of believers taught their children that “the pioneer tie and the October star are a symbol of renunciation of God, that what they study in schools is a fiction of Satan” (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-c). As a result, religious isolation became not just forced, but value-motivated, giving meaning to cultural steadfastness as a choice and righteousness.

Despite their alienation and fear, German communities created microspaces of resistance that outwardly took on a modified form in the form of accepting the ideals of Soviet identity, while internally preserving and reproducing religious and ethnic identity.

Such spaces became: kitchens – where the Bible was read in the evening and “their” topics were discussed; cemeteries – as places of memory and continuity of generations; informal family gatherings where Protestant holidays were celebrated: Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving; secret meetings in the woods, barns, cellars, where baptisms, weddings and psalms were sung. “After their exposure in the fall of 1965, following the publication of an article about their reactionary activities, the Jehovah's Witnesses no longer gather as a single

group, but have split into three separate groups and now operate in a more conspiratorial manner” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1967).

Admittedly, these spaces were not publicly legitimized; nevertheless, they served as sites of cultural reproduction of identity, albeit in a condensed and altered form.

It is important to emphasize that the segregation of German religious communities in northern Kazakhstan was not solely a product of domestic politics. Most likely, it was the result of a contradictory and complex dialogue between state pressure and internal survival strategies. Isolation, which arose as a measure of protection, eventually developed into a religious worldview.

This determined, on the one hand, the resilience, and on the other, the insularity of the German communities, leaving a profound mark on the transformation of identity under the conditions of the Soviet atheist campaign, up to and including the desire to reconcile fundamentally irreconcilable worldview constants. Bazylyuk, the head of the ECB group at the Yesil station in the Tselinograd region, believed that “communists and Baptists” could peacefully coexist.

You are Communists, we are Baptists, we are building the same thing. And if we are building the same thing, then why are you waging an ideological struggle against us? You do your job, we do ours, and then we'll see what happens. (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, 1963)

### **Assimilation and Identity Transformation: A Religious Minority within the Space of Late Soviet Modernization**

The Protestant subculture in Virgin Lands-era Kazakhstan was widely expected to wither away. Protestant communities were placed under the control of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUCECB), a structure within which any opposition to party and state ideology was virtually impossible. However, a kind of metamorphosis occurred – one in which systemic humiliation became not only a factor in the subculture’s survival, but also a catalyst for its renewal and resurgence.

As noted above, isolated from confessional centers, subjected to structural discrimination, but possessing stable mechanisms of self-preservation, German Protestant communities demonstrated a wide range of adaptive/assimilation strategies, from joining another religious group for a certain period and/or creating a “new religious trend” to partially assimilating Soviet identity.

As an example, we can cite information about a small Protestant group of Pentecostals in Petropavlovsk, which underwent complex metamorphoses in its history. Lacking connections with more organized groups beyond the region, the community “gradually came under the influence of Baptist and Evangelical sects closely related to them, or under the influence of other sectarian groups or individuals who had no relation to the Pentecostal sect” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955). Here it should be noted that, merging with groups of Baptists or Evangelicals, Pentecostals invariably tried to preserve the basic tenet of the teaching – their desire to “preach in different languages” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955).

The convergence of Evangelical Pentecostal Christians with the Baptist union did not lead to the strengthening of the former, since the Pentecostals who joined the local Petropavlovsk ECB community still had a desire to hold prayer meetings where they could freely show their “gift of the spirit”. They sometimes joined this community, then were excluded from it for such “preaching”, disintegrated, and were accepted again and were excluded again after a while (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955). A similar situation and “fate” befell other small groups of Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Molokans, and other Protestant communities.

The numerical growth of certain Protestant communities was at times hindered by rivalry for parishioners among different religious movements. One example can be found in the observations of USDRK official V. Lyapunov, who noted that the German ECB group in Peterfeld, “despite the presence of such propagandists as the head of the Stolbaptista group with a great deal of experience”, did not experience significant growth due to the presence of a strong Lutheran community in the village. According to Lyapunov, the Lutheran community “at first not only offered no resistance to the Baptists in their attempts to extend their influence, but almost entirely took part in the prayer meetings of the sectarian group. However, realizing the danger of disintegration if the sect [Baptists] continued to grow stronger, they ceased attending its prayer meetings” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

This process cannot be reduced either to complete assimilation or to heroic isolation; rather, it represents a dynamic reconfiguration of ethno-religious identity, triggered by the policies of Soviet modernization and atheization.

The Baptist faith, as one of the most popular and extremely conservative in the northern regions of Kazakhstan, was most opposed to the influence of the culture of other cults, most of which they associated with ignorance and dark forces.

However, it can be observed that, at times, the decline in the number of German Protestants, particularly due to wavering individuals and disaffected youth, led to strategies aimed at “winning over” adherents from one church to another. This was especially the case with Orthodox Christians, who had moved to northern Kazakhstan in greater numbers. As a result, the ranks of German Protestant believers occasionally grew through the inclusion of members of other ethnic groups, primarily those of Christian faiths. Importantly, this process was mutual in nature. As noted by the Baptist leader of the Bulayevo district: “...I had conversations with supporters of the ‘Initiative Group’ – the ‘Schismatics’ – who tried to win me over to their side, and through me, the entire Baptist group of Bulayevo”. Appeals from the “Initiative Group” were addressed to the Baptists, but, according to the leader, he chose not to read these appeals to the congregation and instead destroyed them (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1963).

One of the visible manifestations of this process was the beginning of Russification within the Protestant church. Along with the German ones, Russian pastors began to stand at the head of the communities. Among the prominent leaders of Protestant communities, one increasingly encounters individuals with Russian surnames – Kostin, Terekhov, Zyryanov, Nabokov, and many others could be listed. A significant portion of the congregation was made up of Russians. For example, in 1956, during a baptism ceremony on the Ishim River near the city of Petropavlovsk, among the ten individuals baptized: “Of the urban residents, 9 were Russian and 1 was a German woman; among the rural residents, 5 were Germans and 3 were Russians” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

The same pattern was observed in other Protestant communities: “All these ECB groups consist exclusively of believers of Russian ethnicity” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). Out of a total of 38 “close associates”, 13 were ethnically German, and the remainder were Russian (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). Considering the statistical data from the 1897 First Census of the Russian Empire on the “Religious Affiliation of Ethnic Groups”, which shows that 98.8% of Russian men and women identified as Orthodox, and only 0.1% as Protestant, the extent of the Russification of Protestant communities becomes evident (Trojnickii, 1904, p. VI).

That is, formally Protestant traditions were preserved and supported by the German communities. However, over time, during the Russification policy, the number of parishioners changed towards those who did not have German roots, and this also did not always contribute to the revival of the national culture of religious minorities. “Seeking” Russians join them easily, without experiencing cultural barriers” (Strukova & Filippov, 2015, p. 545). The influx

of “other” people was changing the religious mentality of German believers: “Wherever you are, wherever you go, no matter who asks you, are you Baptists? You must answer “no”. We are Christians”, Brother Valentin declared in his sermon as early as 1976” (State Archive of Astana, n.d.-b).

Elements of ritual practice also changed, incorporating aspects of “Orthodox splendor” – festive meals with kulich (Easter cakes), the use of icons, and candles. Thus, there was a kind of sacralization of culture and a deep evolution of many German Protestant communities. It is important to note that not only was the form changing, but also the content, including the main stronghold of Protestant religiosity – the rejection of “splendor”.

As previously noted, the process of segregation or assimilation of religious groups occurred for various reasons. Undoubtedly, the Soviet government played a huge role in this issue. However, in the interest of fairness, it should be noted that the process of dissolution into another religious culture and, consequently, the decline in the number of believers, was also influenced by internal factors, such as “ongoing religious disputes and quarrels within the sect” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955). The leadership of the community by individuals whose “un-Christian behavior” and “debauched lifestyle” discredited them in the eyes of both their fellow believers and “sympathetic” outsiders (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955).

Secondly, the human factor played an important role in these processes, more precisely, the leader – the presbyter, whose management left its mark on the future fate of the community. As an example, we may refer to a brief account of one of the strongest Protestant communities in northern Kazakhstan – the registered ECB congregation in the city of Petropavlovsk, which for a long time served as the center of Baptist life in the region.

In the 1950s, the community was led by presbyter S.M. Gudoshnikov, who “from the very first days of his appointment to the Petropavlovsk congregation, undertook highly active efforts to recruit new members and increase its overall size” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1955). It can be argued that presbyter S.M. Gudoshnikov’s primary objective was to establish a strong Baptist organization and to extend its influence over all unregistered Baptist groups in the North Kazakhstan Region and near its borders, with the goal of creating a regional Baptist leadership center in the city of Petropavlovsk, headed by a regional presbyter. To achieve his goal, “Gudoshnikov did not hesitate to violate not only the guidelines of his center, but also a separate provision on religious cults” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957).

According to the directive of the AUCECB, each person who turned to God was required, before undergoing water baptism and becoming a full member, to serve for at least one year as a “close associate”, during which time they would be under the observation of the community regarding their “Christian way of life”. This requirement thus implied that the recruitment of “close associates” could only be carried out among individuals residing within the area of the community’s direct activity, thereby enabling the congregation and the presbyter to exercise such supervision. S. Gudoshnikov, however, recruited “close associates” without regard for their place of residence and, in certain cases, admitted individuals who lived as far as 200 kilometers from the Petropavlovsk community.

According to the directive of AUCECB, water baptism could be administered to individuals of both sexes who had reached the age of 20; however, if such individuals were students, baptism was to take place only after the completion of their education. Judging by internal reports from state officials, S. Gudoshnikov regularly accepted adolescents aged 15 to 16 and students, including members of the Komsomol, into the group of “close associates”.

In addition, Presbyter S. Gudoshnikov performed weddings between believers and non-believers, which also contradicted the guidelines of AUCECB (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). Taken together, all his actions – both legal and “illegal” from the perspective of the church and the state – contributed to the growth of the community of believers and significantly strengthened the Baptist congregation in Petropavlovsk. However, the example of

Presbyter S.M. Gudoshnikov is the exception rather than the rule in the ECB communities of northern Kazakhstan.

In the absence of community leaders and the resulting decline in congregational activity, elderly women played a crucial role in preserving religious life, serving not only as “spiritual guardians” but also as de facto “catechists” within the family. This practice aligns with the fact that, in traditional German Protestant culture, a high level of religious discipline was often maintained through everyday routines and the gendered transmission of values (Mazhitova et al., 2022).

In such conditions, women’s religiosity becomes not only ritualistic, but also educational: it not only preserves dogmas, but “embeds” religious images into everyday life – through the common singing of psalms, kneeling, and reciting prayers. This transmission was not formal but operated at the level of cultural memory and everyday rehearsal. For example, a group of Sabbatarian Pentecostals in the village of Kazanka, North Kazakhstan Region, consisting of “eight women”, regularly held prayer meetings on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons. In the village of Mamlyutka in the same region lived the only Seventh-day Adventist Lopukhina, “whose pernicious influence extended to her own children” (North Kazakhstan State Archive, 1957). The small size of the communities should not be misleading, as in areas where Lutheran religious groups were sufficiently strong, other denominations did not experience significant development. But, nevertheless, there was also, as a rule, the dominant role belonged to women.

### **Childhood in a German Protestant Community: Alienation or Assimilation?**

One of the factors threatening the preservation of religious identity was the process of Russification, primarily as an inevitable development in the context of Kazakhstan’s multiethnic society and the absence of national (ethnic language) schools.

As previously noted, during the Virgin Lands campaign, “first-wave settlers” arrived in northern Kazakhstan from all corners of the USSR, which is why education at all levels was conducted in Russian. Since the core religious literature (the Bible, hymns) was in German, the second half of the 20th century saw the emergence of a threat to language preservation and, consequently, to the continuity of both national and religious culture.

Anti-religious education in the education system was conducted in two directions: “Firstly, directly in the educational process, by filling disciplines with anti-religious material; secondly, during extracurricular educational work” (Alpyspaeva et al., 2025, p. 389). School curricula in history, biology, and physics were filled with atheistic content; as a result, students were taught that all-natural phenomena do not occur according to the will of God, but according to the laws of science (Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1958b). Schools and pioneer organizations, school radio and wall newspapers, cinemas and local newspapers, evenings, and clubs for young atheists, newspapers have become the most important channels for introducing a “scientific worldview” and ridiculing religiosity as a manifestation of ignorance and backwardness.

In those years, atheistic broadcasts and conversations on topics: “Omens and Superstitions”, “Religion is the opium of the people”, and “religious rituals are the enemies of health” were designed to form a materialistic understanding of nature among students, convince them of the inconsistency of the religious myth of the divine creation of the world, and show religion as a relic of the past (Russian State Archive of Scientific and Technical Documentation, 1959, 1960, 1974).

In addition, teachers were charged with visiting church parishes during services, the apartments of Protestant believers, and identifying cases of children participating in religious rituals. The texts of the reports on the results of the raids allow us to characterize the behavior

of children and youth at prayer services, their involvement in conducting rituals, as well as their psycho-emotional state. Thus, the teacher at Tselinograd school No. 10, Ye.I. Bessonova, having attended the service at the Baptist prayer house, writes the following: “About thirty children attended the meeting, mostly teenagers, boys and girls. <...> They read poetry with great feeling, it seems that they believe deeply and sincerely” (State Archive of Astana, n.d.-c).

Classroom teachers at school No. 8 in Tselinograd, G.V. Kmozheva and V.S. Sakharova, visited the apartment of one of the Baptist leaders, T. Babich. In their report, they noted that “children of Baptist believers have their own room where they study. In this room, next to the geographical map of the USSR, there are religious slogans. It is felt that the father has a very great influence on the children” (State Archive of Astana, n.d.-a).

It is noteworthy in such reports that Protestantism has not been completely Russified, despite the ongoing policy of Russification, since, if earlier the sermons of the elders were conducted in two languages: Russian and German, then from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, some changes in favor of the German language can be noted. On several occasions, visitors to the prayer service noted that the presbyter's service was conducted in German (State Archive of the Russian Federation, 1975, 1979), moreover, the children participating in the prayer services read poetry and sang hymns in German (State Archive of Astana, n.d.-d). Most likely, the order of the Ministry of Education dated February 20, 1957, played an important role in this linguistic reversal. “On the introduction of German language teaching for children of German ethnicity in schools of the Kazakh SSR” Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1958a). Children from religious families had to hide their faith, participate in pioneer rituals, and write anti-church writings. Many were subjected to psychological pressure and alienation if they refused to participate in school activities, such as those related to the social life of school groups. For example, when a student of the 4th grade of Chernoretskaya secondary school V. Lust, explaining his unwillingness to be a pioneer, expressed among his classmates: “I don't want to burn in a fire because of this tie of yours, I won't wear it, don't consider me a pioneer,” then a conversation was held with his parents by the “parent committee of the school, deputies of the local council, the street committee and reputable education workers” (SAPR, fond 698, opis 1, delo 6, list 7).

We observe profound consequences of the policy of shaping the “new man” not only socio-political, but also cultural. These efforts fostered an atmosphere of fear and coercion, aimed at the institutional dismantling of the religious environment and the forced “enculturation” of believers into the secular sphere. In addition to the above, it should be noted that the path to “re-education” – or more precisely, assimilation into Soviet society – was significantly facilitated by the transformation of the Germans' own perception of their religious culture. The memory of it persisted, but the surrounding secular environment gradually reshaped its value orientations.

It is important that the social assimilation of Germans was carried out through integration into the Soviet labor and educational system. Young Germans enrolled in vocational schools and technical schools, worked on Komsomol construction sites, and were involved in construction on newly developed virgin lands. Social contact with Soviet youth under conditions of ideological control led to the gradual loss of religious and ethno-confessional identity, resulting in assimilation into Soviet reality.

In addition, family religiosity has become an object of ridicule, alienation, and marginalization. This ideological construct persisted in Soviet atheist consciousness for a long time. Parents themselves played a certain role in this process by enrolling their children in special religious study groups that were close to outside observers. The extent to which they prioritized distancing their children from participation in public organizations and instilling religious beliefs is evidenced by the following facts. When summoned to a meeting at the school, the Baptist woman A. Mathis stated:

I have instilled religion in my children and told them: if they want to be considered descendants of apes, then let them go to school and wear ties; but if they want to be seen as coming from God, then they should not go to school (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-b). This created the effect of internal segregation: families either shut themselves up, losing social ties, or were forced to conform to assimilationist standards.

Taken together, this led to deep internal conflicts in both individual and collective identity. During exams in physics, history, and social studies, the children of Evangelical Christian-Baptist leaders Ewert and Foth, upon receiving their exam questions, asked the teacher: “How should we answer this question on the ticket? Should we answer as it is written in the textbook, as you taught us, or as I think and understand it myself?” (State Archive of the Pavlodar Region, n.d.-c). The psychological duality between the external (official) and internal (religious, private) “self” became one of the enduring features of German religious culture during the period under study.

The Soviet system created a complex matrix of pressure on the religious identity of German communities in the Virgin Lands of Kazakhstan. However, even under these conditions, faith was not eliminated. Assimilation mechanisms operated effectively but not entirely: resistance, evasion, and internal autonomy indicate that religious identity can be not only institutional but also anthropologically deeply rooted in cultural memory and personal ethics.

## Conclusion

The present study has made it possible to reconstruct the religious life of German Protestant communities in Virgin Lands Kazakhstan during the 1950s-60s and to trace their transformation under the influence of the anti-religious campaign of the Khrushchev decade. As noted in the introduction, a key objective of this research was to understand which forms of religious life were preserved under conditions of systemic ideological pressure and how processes of assimilation and/or segregation unfolded within German religious groups.

The findings demonstrate that the anti-religious policy of that period was both complex and institutional in character. This was manifested in the reduction of the number of registered congregations, the strengthening of the powers of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), restrictions on grassroots religious initiative, and the displacement of religion into the private sphere. Despite these pressures, the religious distinctiveness of Protestant communities did not disappear; rather, it underwent qualitative transformation. Domestic religiosity, family rituals, the activities of formal and informal leaders, and hidden channels of faith transmission confirm the existence of a particular form of “household religious network” that compensated for the absence of official institutions and maintained ethnoconfessional solidarity.

An additional important outcome of the study is the identification of a high degree of variability in religious practices, shaped by a complex array of factors. On the one hand, the Soviet authorities deployed a broad arsenal of regulatory tools: institutional control of religious life, cultural homogenization, stigmatization of believers, ideological influence on youth, and the use of language as an identity barrier. These measures did weaken traditional forms of religious existence to some extent – churches and prayer houses were closed, worship in several denominations was forced underground, elements of crypto-religiosity emerged, generational rupture intensified, and religious experience became increasingly individualized. Partial assimilation also occurred, including the Russification of communities, the participation of Russian believers, and the transition of certain groups into larger Protestant denominations.

On the other hand, cultural isolation and political pressure fostered alternative mechanisms of identity preservation, expressed in efforts to maintain ethnoconfessional cohesion, limit contact with the surrounding environment, and preserve language and cultural

codes – mechanisms that served as critical strategies of self-preservation under ideological constraints. As this study demonstrates, older women played a particularly significant role in sustaining communal religiosity, acting as custodians of tradition.

The qualitative findings also show the emergence of new youth groups as an expression of the adaptive potential of German communities and their capacity to create alternative forms of religious expression.

Overall, the research confirms that the religiosity of German Protestants in Virgin Lands Kazakhstan constituted not a static but a dynamic system capable of reflection and adaptation under anti-religious state policy. Religious identity not only persisted but became part of a broader strategy of ethnocultural self-preservation. Future research could offer a more detailed analysis of gender and generational dimensions of religiosity and apply interdisciplinary methods (visual anthropology, digital cartography, oral history) to reconstruct mechanisms of religious identity preservation among Germans and other ethnic groups of Soviet Kazakhstan.

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### Notes on Contributor

**Zhanna Mazhitova** – Doctor of Historical Sciences, professor of the Department of Social and Humanitarian Sciences at Astana Medical University. Research interests include issues of social anthropology, as well as the history and historiography of the social structure of Kazakh society. In recent years, the focus has shifted toward studying the everyday life of the people inhabiting the territory of Northern Kazakhstan during the Soviet period.

### ORCID

**Zhanna Mazhitova**, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3712-2127>