

Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz Republic)

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Country Profile

Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz Republic) is a Central Asia country situated in western and central parts of the Tien Shan mountain group. The capital of the country is the city of Bishkek (formerly Pishpek and Frunze).

In 1853, the Sarybagysh tribe was one of the first who asked for Russian citizenship. Two years later one of the largest Kyrgyz tribes, Bugu, that had about 10,000 nomad tents, also declared its will to join Russia. The southern part of the country, a future Fergan Region, joined Russia in 1876. The northern part of Kyrgyzstan became a part of Semirechye Region with the city of Vernyy (now Almaty) as a regional capital. When Kyrgyzstan joined Russia, slavery was abolished and wasteful internal conflicts and devastating attacks from outside ceased.

“In order to strengthen ties between different regions of Kyrgyzstan, as well as between regions of Central Asia and central part of Russia, it was significant to develop road network, telegraph communication and railway construction.”¹

In a political sense, the indigenous population at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was mostly passive. However, revolutionary events of the first half of the 20th century changed that situation. Several peasant disturbances occurred in Kyrgyzstan. The transfer of land that belonged to indigenous people to settlers caused notable disaffection and worsened the economic situation. This factor, as well as mobilization of local residents for military logistics works, prompted the 1916 upheaval that was crushed by Tsarist troops. All of this led to rejection of Russia’s imperialistic policy in the region. In March 1917, the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies were set up in several Kyrgyz cities, and by the middle of 1918, the Soviet regime was established all over Kyrgyzstan, mostly peacefully.

On October 14, 1924, the Kara-Kyrgyz (from May 25, 1925 – Kyrgyz) Autonomous Region, as a part of the RSFSR, was organized, and on February 1, 1926, it was reorganized into the Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On December 5, 1936, the Kyrgyz ASSR was separated from the RSFSR and named the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, thus becoming a full-fledged member of the USSR.

On August 31, 1991, Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian republic that proclaimed its independence.

Background of Adventism Development in Kyrgyzstan

According to H. J. Löbsack, the prerequisite for friendly acceptance of Adventism in Turkestan in general was the Bahai movement.²

In 1844 in the Persian city of Shiraz, a young salesman named Seyid Ali-Muhammad, known as “Bab” (that can be translated from Arabic as “Gates”), declared a soon coming of God’s Prophet, awaited by all the nations in the world. That same year, Bab, with many of his followers, was executed by order of the Shah of Iran³. Bahatism spread thanks to one of Baba’s followers – Mirza Khusayn Ali (1817-1892), better known as Bahauulla (“Baha-Allah” – “God’s Shining”). In 1863, living in exile, Bahauulla declared that he was the one whose coming had been promised by Bab.

From 1882 to 1884, the Bahais, running away from persecution from Shia clergy men and authorities, made their home in the Turkestan region – in Ashkhabad, which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire⁴. In the late 19th century, the number of Bahais in this town reached 1,000. The Russian authorities used to patronize the Bahais living across the Central Asia.⁵ The Bahai eschatological expectations made the message of Daniel’s prophecies about Christ’s coming more known by local citizens, including people in Kyrgyzstan.

Another prerequisite for the spread of Adventist message was that Germans from the Volga region moved to the territory of contemporary southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan at the close of the 19th century.

The First Adventists in Kyrgyzstan

The Adventist message came to Kyrgyzstan in 1891. At that time, this territory of Asiatic Russia was named as a Turkestan. Heinrich Ott, who was an Adventist, moved with his family from the Volga region to the village of Orlovka. Other Adventist families also came there. Philipp Trippel was among the newcomers as well. He was the first mentor who coordinated preaching the Adventist message. For many years, Philipp Trippel was taking care of three small groups in the villages of Orlovka and Kalinino and the regional center of Talas. He also organized construction of a large chapel on his piece of land in Orlovka. The young Adventist congregation in that village numbered 60 members. Heinrich Kohl, an orchestral conductor, organized a choir of 30 members and a string band. At that time, worship services in the Orlovka church were conducted by A. Herten and H. Ott. The Sabbath School classes were supervised by brethren D. R. Bertram and H. Ott.

The first official reference to Seventh-day Adventists in Kyrgyzstan dates back to 1906, when the major part of believers settled in Aulie-Ata District (contemporary Kazakhstan) and the villages of Orlovka, Johannesdorf, and Staperfeld. In 1906, the Adventists living in Central Asia (Turkestan) were joined to the Asiatic Russian Mission.

Development of Organizational Structure

On January 1, 1911, the Siberian Missionary Field, headed by Gerhard P. Perk, was organized. Three Central Asian Adventist congregations having 91 members at that time were detached from the former East Russian Missionary Field to constitute the Turkestan Missionary Field. In spring 1912, Pastor G.I. Zierath was sent to serve in the city of Samarkand. On May 25, he, together with the field's chair Jacob G. Ebel from Tashkent, visited village of Konstantinovka, and from there, accompanied by brethren Philipp Trippel and Heinrich Ott, they went to village of Orlovka where they "stayed for nine days, had blessed gatherings, and could baptize several souls and celebrate the communion service that included the ordinance of foot-washing"⁶

During World War I, the Turkestan Missionary Field was headed by B. H. Schmidt. In 1921, this field was renamed the Central Asia Missionary Field. Initially, it was headed by G. A. Ostwald, who was succeeded in 1925 by G. A. Arnhold. In 1926, the Central Asia Missionary Field was re-organized into the Central Asia Conference that was chaired by K. F. Remfert.

By that time, there were three Adventist congregations in Orlovka, Podvodnaya, Johannesdorf, and Kalininsk with about 130 members. Pastor Jakob Stieben wrote: "It took me thirteen weeks to visit our churches in Kyrgyzstan. I had to travel at least 1,500 km by sledge or wagon, spending days and even nights on the road, often in a thunderstorm or at very low temperatures. It was a perfect bliss when I finally reached my brethren"⁷

Influence of Political Processes on the Adventist Church

During the years of repressions in the 1930s, many church leaders and active members were arrested and sent to labor camps. The situation changed a bit after the World War II, but the authorities refused the registration of the survived Adventist congregations. The persecution of believers continued. For example, in city of Frunze, sisters Vera, Anastasia and Anna (Lodya) spent five months under investigation and were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment (their story is described in a book *Po ternistomu puti (Along a Thorny Path)* by the spouses Matsanov).

In the early 1950s, Pastor Pyotr Silman repeatedly came to serve in the church in city of Frunze.

In 1953, ordained elder Jakob G. Schneider moved from South Kazakhstan Region to the village of Orlovka to serve the local church, and during that same year, Pastor Eduard A. Rebein suggested they build a chapel in Orlovka. Thus, the Orlovka congregation was restored and soon grew up to 80 members. Pastor Kazimir A. Korolenko, who served as a senior preacher for Central Asia, periodically traveled to Kyrgyzstan from Dushanbe and provided substantive support to the Orlovka congregation. His active work was not left unnoticed, and during one of his visits, K. Korolenko was arrested but soon released and put on notice.

Several years later, Jakob G. Schneider was arrested and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment. As a result, the Orlovka chapel was confiscated, closed, and sold by authorities. Nevertheless, church members kept on

gathering in small groups in their houses. In March 1961, Rudolph Ott was sentenced to one year of imprisonment because his children skipped school on Saturdays.

Despite persecution, those were the days of active unofficial missionary efforts of church members and ministers. New churches and companies emerged in the territory of Kyrgyzstan, both in the southern and northern regions. The development of Adventist congregations was facilitated by Pastor Otto A. Schwabauer. Pastor Artur F. Stele coordinated the work in Kyrgyzstan until 1978.

In 1978, the Kyrgyz (Southern) Conference, with headquarters in Frunze (capital of Kyrgyzstan), was officially organized. The conference officers were Roman T. Wagner (chair), Valeriy N. Nazimko (secretary), and Aleksandr V. Svoboda (treasurer). They served the conference over the course of 15 years.

From the beginning of *perestroika*, many pastors and church members of German origin moved to their historical homeland. And because they made up the majority in many churches, some congregations ceased to exist. Nevertheless, the favorable conditions for evangelism opened up new opportunities for the Church. The number of members and churches started to grow.

In 1993, Rubin R. Ott was elected president of the Kyrgyzstan Conference. In subsequent years, the Kyrgyz Conference was reorganized several times (first being included in the Central Asia Conference and subsequently again separating as the Kyrgyzstan Conference), and in 1999, it comprised 31 local churches with 1,780 members.

In 2002-2008, the Kyrgyzstan Conference was chaired by Vladimir P. Mikhailov, and in 2008-2010 by Igor P. Vasilchenko. A new wave of migration, this time of Russian-speaking people, once again significantly reduced the membership. In 2010, the Kyrgyzstan Conference was reorganized into Kyrgyz Mission headed by Valeriy N. Nazimko in 2010-2014, by Rubin R. Ott in 2014-2017, and by Roman L. Alekseykin since 2017.

By the end of June 2020, the Kyrgyzstan Mission comprised 10 churches and 646 members. In the city of Bishkek, there were seven churches, including one for hearing-impaired people. The Kyrgyzstan Mission has an ADRA branch office, and a SUM Media Center is operating in its territory. In city of Tokmak there is an Adventist school "Naslediye" with over 300 students.

SOURCES

Due to decades of persecution, historical sources were very often not preserved in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and as a result, Adventist history in Russia and other successor states of the USSR is dependent on collective memory and oral traditions, on which this article draws.

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NOTES

1. http://www.for.kg/ru/kyrgyzstan_history/2.
2. G.I. Lebsack, "Vtoroy s'ezd v Sredney Azii," *Golos Istiny* 12, 1927, 28-30.
3. D. Pracht, "Obshchina bakhai v Sredney Azii v kontse XIX – nachale XX veka," <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=17296369>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. G. I. Zierath, "S Kavkaza v Srednyuyu Aziyu," *Maslina Magazine Supplement* 2, 1913, 29-30.
7. J. Stieben, "V buryu i tyomnyuyu noch' po Sibiri i Kirgizskoy respublike," *Golos Istiny* 8, 1927, 26.

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