

Belarus

DMITRY O. YUNAK, AND VASILIIY D. YUNAK

Dmitry O. Yunak graduated in Finance and Economics from a Soviet secular educational institution and completed a six-year course of Theology at an underground SDA Theological Institute (Moldova, USSR). In the Soviet times, he served as a pastor, administrator, and bible/history professor in the underground Theological Institute. In 1990, he was appointed as Treasurer and Publishing Ministries Director for the USSR Division. After the Euro-Asia Division was organized in 1991, Dmitry O. Yunak served as ESD auditor and under treasurer. He was the author of a dozen of SDA history books and scores of other publications. He owns a major SDA history archive.

Vasiliiy D. Yunak

Country Profile

Belarus is a state geographically located in Eastern Europe on the world map. Etymologically, "*Belarus*" derived its name from the word "White Rus," known since the middle of the thirteenth century. In 1890 the name "Belarus" became generally accepted for designation of all territories where Belarusian people live. Politically, the first unions in Belarus are thought to have been shaped in the sixth to ninth centuries. This process was connected with the expansion of the Slavs. Around 988 the Kievan Rus' was religiously Christianized by Prince Vladimir the Great, and in 992 an eparchy was founded in Polotsk, and in 1005 one more in Turov.

Unfortunately, much of Russian land was devastated because of the Mongolian invasion in 1237--1240. This invasion only slightly touched the territory of contemporary Belarus. In 1240 as a result of subjection of Lithuanian and Russian lands to Prince Mindaugas, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania arose. This Duchy also contained Belarus acres. In 1569, during the Livonian War, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was forced to make an unfavorable Union of Lublin with the Kingdom of Poland that consequently created a confederation known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

It is pertinent to add that, because of the inter-confessional, inter-ethnic, social conflicts, economic decline and destructive wars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became weak and depended on the Russian Empire, which caused the country's partition between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania became a part of the Russian Empire in 1772 as a few Governorates, unofficially named the Northwestern Krai. The Vitebsk and Mogilev Governorates were attached to the Belarusian Governorate General, simply named Belarus.

During the Patriotic War in 1812, the population of this region fought for both contending armies. The politics of Russian language support conducted emergence of writers and poets that used the Belarusian language. Moreover, the socioeconomic modernization caused industrial development and demographic increase. Furthermore, the January Uprising in 1863 to 1864 facilitated the growth of Belarusian self-identification.

When the World War I started in 1914, the Russian Empire joined the war on the side of the Triple Entente. In August-September of 1915, Germany then occupied Western Belarus, and the fighting line settled down there. However, after the February Revolution in 1917, the Russian Empire ceased to exist. Therefore, the control in Petrograd was taken by the Russian Provisional Government and then by the Soviets.

Peacefully, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918. According to this Treaty, most part of Belarusian territory were to be placed under the German control. On January 31, 1919, Belarus withdrew from the RSFSR and was renamed as "The Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia," and after the founding of the USSR in 1922, it was known as "The Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic" (BSSR). Meanwhile, dynamic industrial processes took place, and new lines of industry and agronomy were being developed in Belarus in the 1920s to 1930s.

Sadly, in the course of the Great Purge in the 1930s, many intellectuals, aristocracy of talent, clergymen, and substantial farmers were executed by shooting or deported to Siberia and Central Asia. In 1939 Western Belarus was joined to the BSSR. After this reunion, 130,000 inhabitants of Western Belarus were repressed. Some 30,000 persons were also sentenced to be shot.

On June 22, 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Belarus was the first who caught the attack and was occupied since the first month of the war. During the war a formidable guerilla movement, second to none in Europe, operated in the Belarusian territory. In June-August of 1944, following the Operation Bagration, the territory of BSSR was freed by the Red Army. In 1945 BSSR became one of the establishers of the United Nations. Nevertheless, the Belarus delegation agreed the decisions of all matters with the Soviet Union delegates.

On June 27, 1990, the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was adopted, and on September 19, 1991, BSSR was renamed as the Republic of Belarus. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and achieving nationhood, Belarus became a parliamentary republic. The first chair of the Supreme Council of Belarus was Stanislav Shushkevich. In 1992 the Belarusian Rouble was introduced, the national army was established, and the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church was legalized.

In 1994 the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus was adopted, and the first presidential election was conducted. As a result, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president, and Belarus was transformed from a parliamentary to a parliamentary-presidential republic. In 1995 the president initiated a referendum that resulted in the Russian language, in addition to the Belarusian language, being recognized as the official language. The state emblem and flag were changed, and the president was given the right to dissolve parliament in case of systematic or gross violation of the constitution. The president pursued a line aimed at economic integration with Russia. In October 2015 the fifth presidential election was held, with Alexander Lukashenko being again reelected.

Preconditions for Spreading the Adventist Message

The doctrine of the end of the world (eschatology), the near Second Coming of Christ, and the millennium (chiliasm, or millennialism) started to spread in the territory of the Russian Empire around the middle of the eighteenth century. At that time evangelists and Molokans (a Russia-specific branch of Protestantism) began to separate themselves from Orthodox Christianity. From the middle of the 1830s, expectations of the soon Second Coming spread also in German settlements in Russia. These were the precursors that paved the way for the adoption of the Adventist message that soon reached Belarus.

Spreading and Development of the Adventist Message and the First Adventists in Belarus

In 1901 the North Russian Missionary Field was organized. It included the territory of Belarus where the first Adventists were converted. D. P. Gäde was the president of this field. The spreading of Adventism was facilitated by Adventist tracts and other literature. According to the testimony of H. J. Löbsack, the Adventist movement in Minsk was initiated by G. Schmitz.

The first official reference to Adventists in the territory of Belarus dates back to 1906. According to "Statistical information on sectarians," in Minsk and the Minsk region there was one Adventist congregation with 14 members who left Orthodoxy. Out of those 14, 10 persons joined the church in 1906, two persons in 1907, and one person in 1911. As of the date of the report (January 1, 1912), one Adventist chapel and one congregation were registered in that territory. In the Mogilev region, there were 17 unregistered Seventh-day Adventists who had left Orthodoxy before the issue of a law on registering new sects (October 17, 1906). In the Grodno region, there was one Adventist who had left Orthodoxy in 1911.

In 1910 the nine dwellers of Minsk--Robert Beme, Otilia Beme, Agatha Neumann and others-- filed a request to the governor of Minsk to permit them to have a room for prayer meetings in the city and to approve Heinrich Löbsack as a pastor for Adventists of the Minsk Governorate. After arranging the matter with the Department of Spiritual Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Minsk Governorate authorities agreed to establishing an Adventist congregation in Minsk headed by Pastor H. J. Löbsack, "the peasant of the Atkarsk district of the Saratov Governorate," and to arranging a prayer room in a private house.¹

In 1910 the family of Gustav Arnhold moved to Minsk, where they got acquainted with H. J. Löbsack, who managed the local church organization. Gustav served as a colporteur in Minsk. In 1913 Arnhold's family moved to the German settlement Antonovka, Dechensk district.

At that time the following brothers, alongside with its President D. P. Gäde, served in the West Russian Missionary Field: Pastor R. Foss, G. Schmitz, and K. F. Remfert (traveling preachers), D. Turovsky (Bible worker), G.

Arnhold and W. Konrad (colporteurs).

Important Points in Membership

In the beginning of the year 1928, there were 142 Adventists in the Belarus missionary field.

At the end of the year 1950, according to reports, there were three Adventist congregations with 412 members.

As of January 1, 1955, there were already five Adventist congregations with 359 members in Belarus.

In 2000 the Belarus Conference was comprised of 45 local churches with 3,880 members.

By 2015 the Belarus Union of Churches comprised 65 local churches with 4,062 members.

Effect of Political Developments on Adventist Work and Church Administrative Units

In 1908 the North Russian Missionary Field was reorganized. Adventists who lived in Grodno and Minsk Governorates were included in the West Russian Missionary Field, and those who lived in Vitebsk Governorate were included in the Baltic Conference headed by J. T. Böttcher, who was at that time also a president of the Russian Union Conference.

In 1921, according to the Peace of Riga, the western territories of Belarus (Grodno and Brest Governorates) were annexed by Poland and thus included in the Eastern Poland Conference that incorporated in 1928 a total of 21 churches and more than fifteen companies, of which 11 churches and 13 companies were located in Western Belarus. The largest churches were those in cities Gorodets, Kolodno, Konyukhi, Mydsk, Ovse mirovo, Pinsk, Slonim, and Fedory. The office of the Eastern Poland Conference was located in city of Lutsk, Volynia. After a while the conference officers moved to the city of Kovel so as to be closer to Belarusian churches and to union administration.

As the western regions of Belarus became a part of Poland, the eastern part of Belarus was initially attached to the North Russian Union. In 1923 it was attached to the Western Ukrainian Union. On August 25, 1924, the Executive Committee of the Western Ukrainian Union decided to organize the Upper-Dnieper Missionary Field with the center in the city of Gomel, to incorporate the Belarusian Governorates and Chernigov Governorate (Ukrainian SSR). E. I. Skorobreshchuk was elected president, and A. F. Afuzin was elected secretary of that new field. From January 1, 1927, the Chernigov region was excluded from the Upper-Dnieper Missionary Field that comprised only Belarusian territories and was renamed Belarus Missionary Field.

On October 24 to 27, 1928, a constituency session of the Belarus Missionary Field took place in Gomel. According to a pay list of 1928, E. I. Skorobreshchuk, F. Kuzemko, R. Kuplis, and A. Zhakov served with the Belarus Missionary Field.

In view of the reorganization and reduction of the number of unions in 1928, it was decided to make the Belarus Missionary Field a part of a new North Eastern Union. At the beginning of 1928, the Belarus field included 142 Adventists.

In the 1930s Adventist pastors and active lay members in Belarus were convicted and deported to the Extreme North or to Siberia. Many members moved to remote villages while some Adventists left the church.

In early autumn of 1939, at the beginning of the war between Germany and Poland, the western regions were reunited with Belarus and Ukraine. After the reunification of Brest and Grodno regions with Belarus, V. Z. Makarchuk served the churches in that territory. However, the war that began in the summer of 1941 reduced the persecution of believers by atheists for a time.

At the end of 1946, the door was opened for the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists to register some churches in western regions of Belarus. Unfortunately, out of a total of 15 churches and companies of western Belarus (that were attached formerly to Eastern Poland Conference), the official registration was granted to only three churches with 387 members plus 37 isolated members. Pastor V.Z. Makarchuk was authorized by the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists to serve all the churches in Belarus. In 1950, on the way home from church in Rakhovichi, V. Z. Makarchuk was arrested and sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment. After the death of I.V. Stalin, V.Z. Makarchuk was granted amnesty and in 1954, broken in health, he returned home. At the end of 1950, there were still three Adventist churches officially registered with 412 members in Belarus. The registration of new churches discontinued.

In 1954 the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists sent Pastor Ivan Katanov from Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod) to pastoral ministry in Belarus. He was serving as a senior pastor for Belarus, who reported to the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, till 1958. As of January 1, 1955, there were five officially registered Adventist churches with 359 members in Belarus.

In December 1960, the Soviet authorities dissolved the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, and Adventist churches had to serve autonomously. The confrontation and division among brethren that took place in Ukraine and Russia started to influence Belarusian churches as well. Pastors who came to serve in Belarus were ordained by contending sides. Belarusian churches were served by pastors from Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Russia. The situation changed in 1978 when Yakov Yakubchik was assigned to take charge of the Adventist Church in Belarus.

On February 8, 1981, a constituency meeting of the Belarus Conference was held in Minsk. Y. S. Yakubchik, who was president of Belarusian Council of Seventh-day Adventists, rendered an account of his work and stepped

down from his office. The delegates elected new officers for Belarus: Pavel Panchenko, president; I. I. Morza, assistant president, and V.V. Mikhnyuk, secretary-treasurer.

In 1984 the delegates of the next constituency meeting of the Belarus Conference elected I. I. Morza as chair of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Belarus. He was serving in this capacity until 1991.

In May 1991 Ivan Ostrovskiy was ordained to pastoral ministry and elected as a president of the Belarus Conference. He was holding this office up to 2000. From 1989 to 1990, the Belarus Conference was a part of the Belarus-Baltic Union, and in 1990 to 1994 belonged to the Baltic Union. In 1994 the Belarus Conference was directly attached to the Euro Asia Division.

From 2000 to 2008, Moisey Ostrovskiy was the president of the Belarus Conference. In 2008 the Belarus Conference was reorganized into the Belarus Union of Churches (BUC).

From 2008 to 2015, Moisey Ostrovskiy was the president of the Belarus Union of Churches. Since 2015, the president of the Belarus Union of Churches has been Vyacheslav Buchnev.

Adventism's Place in the Country

In the course of only one year from the moment of obtaining a permit to receive and distribute humanitarian assistance (May 29, 2001), the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Belarus "received from Germany nine humanitarian supplies that contained 449 various goods for a total weight of 16,990 kg. Financial assistance was rendered to 16 entities, including district social care departments in different cities, a social shelter, and various charitable organizations, as well as to large families, parents of disabled children, and returned convicts. A total of 603 families received humanitarian assistance, including 500 families from 20 Adventist congregations. Special gifts were given to teenagers deprived of parental care, who served a term in the Bobruisk young offender institution."² In the years that followed, ADRA received and distributed humanitarian aid and medicines from Italy. They also organized tours for children from Belarus to Italy.

A priority was placed on conducting evangelistic programs, initially by foreign evangelists, and then Pastor Moisey Ostrovskiy became the leading native evangelist of the Euro-Asia Division, who conducted dozens of evangelistic programs, not only in Belarus but also in the vast territory of the former Soviet Union.

Challenges to Mission and What Remains to be Done

In planning the extension and development of evangelism in the Republic of Belarus, the church must concentrate on the areas of overriding priority. In particular, the *Mission to the Cities* continues to be on the agenda.

At present, there are no Adventist general education schools in Belarus. Therefore, the opening of elementary and secondary schools under the aegis of large local churches should be considered a matter of the first magnitude. In Mogilev Region, near the city of Bobruisk, a multipurpose complex is being built to meet the contemporary requirements and cover many aspects of denominational work.

The development of medical missionary work and establishment of medical centers of influence in the cities and health centers in rural areas is the next important task for the Belarus Union of Churches.

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.

2017 Annual Statistical Report. Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research: Silver Spring, Maryland, 2017.

Grigoryev, V. "Pismo iz 1937 goda." *Blagaya Vest' Newspaper*, no. 11 (1991).

Lebsack, H.I. *Velikoye Adventistskoye dvizheniye i Adventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii* Rostov-na-Donu: Altair, 2006.

Lukashenko, D.S. *Pomni ves' put' svoi*. Personal Archives.

Nastolny kalendar' sluzhitelya Tserkvi ASD. Moscow, 1981.

Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook. Silver Spring, Maryland: Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2015.

Statisticheskiye svedeniya o sektantakh, January 1, 1912. Fund 821, Inventory 133, File 193. Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), Moscow.

Yunak, D.O. *Dla roda posleduyushchego. Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Belorusii* Tula–Minsk, 2005. Available in Personal Archives.

NOTES

1. Fund 821, Inventory 133, File 209, 22a-25b. Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), Moscow.

2. *Khristianskaya Sem'ya*, no. 4 (2002): 2.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000