

# Turkmenistan

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## DMITRY O. 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.

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## Country Profile

Turkmenistan is a country situated in Central Asia and washed in the west by the Caspian Sea. It borders by land on Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, and across the sea with Russia and Azerbaijan. The Turkmenistan area is 488,100 km<sup>2</sup>. The population of the country is around 6 million people.

In 1869 to 1885, the territory of the contemporary Turkmenistan was attached to Russia (Trans-Caspian Region). In November-December 1917, the Soviet regime was established in Turkmenistan. On August 7, 1921, the major part of Turkmenistan was included in the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR) as a Turkmen Region. On October 27, 1924, TASSR was reorganized into Turkmen SSR.

In October 1990, the Supreme Council of Turkmen SSR established the position of the republic's president. On October 26, 1991, a referendum on independence of Turkmenia was held, and 93 percent of citizens of Turkmen SSR voted positively on that proposal. On the next day, the Supreme Council adopted the Declaration of Independence and approved the country's new name – Turkmenistan.

The great majority of Turkmen population (89 percent) are Moslems (mostly Sunnis), about 9 percent - Christians, and 2 percent - believers of other confessions. All permitted religious organizations are strictly controlled by the government.

## Background of Adventism Development in Turkmenistan

According to H. J. Löbsack, the prerequisite for friendly acceptance of Adventism in Turkestan at large was the Bahai movement.<sup>1</sup>

“In 1882–1884, the Bahais, running away from persecution from Shia clergy men and authorities, made their home in Turkestan region – in Ashkhabad, which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire.”<sup>2</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Bahais in this town reached 1,000. The Russian authorities used to patronize the Bahais living across the Central Asia.<sup>3</sup>

The Bahai eschatological expectations made the message of Daniel's prophecies about Christ's coming more known by local citizens, including people in Turkmenistan.

## The First Adventists in Turkmenistan

The first official data about members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Central Asia appeared in the published reports of Russian Union for the second quarter of 1908 and mentioned a company of Seventh-day Adventists in the city of Ashkhabad consisting of six members.

In 1908, H. K. Löbsack visited the scattered members of the Adventist Church who lived in Turkestan and met with brethren in the cities of Merv', Bayram-Ali, and Ashkhabad.

## Development of the Church's Organizational Structure

From 1911, Seventh-day Adventists in Turkmenistan were united in the Turkestan Missionary Field, which was organized in 1909. In 1921, the Turkestan Missionary Field was renamed the Central Asia Field. In 1923, by the decision of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, Pastor I. T. Klimenko moved to Ashkhabad. However, he served in that city only for a short time.

In 1926, the Central Asia Field was reorganized into the Central Asia Conference, headed by K. F. Remfert. On October 18, 1927, H. J. Löbsack took a boat to get from Caucasus, across the Caspian Sea, to Central Asia to take part in the second constituency meeting of the Central Asia Conference in Tashkent. This is how he described his journey: "City Ashkhabad, the capital of Turkmen SSR, is located 554 km away from the Caspian Sea. In that city there is a small company of Seventh-day Adventists and friends of the truth, who have sent us an urgent request for a preacher. The Congress in Tashkent decided to satisfy their request"<sup>4</sup>

## Influence of Political Processes on the Adventist Church

The repressions of 1930s affected believers in Turkmenistan as well. The Church's organizational structure in that region was virtually destroyed. There are oral testimonies about a company of Adventists that existed in Turkmenistan in 1940-1950s.

On October 6, 1948, a catastrophic earthquake took place in Ashkhabad that claimed the lives of over 40,000 people and razed the city to the ground. There is a stock photo with a group of surviving Adventists standing near a mass grave of their brethren who were killed by the earthquake.

The official post-war history of the Adventist Church in Turkmenistan started in mid-1970s when Pastor Vladimir Vysotskiy was serving there. He, his wife Vera, and their 11 children conducted worship services in their house. In 1977, Vladimir Vysotskiy left for Moscow for treatment and died there in 1978. But his family remained in Ashkhabad. In 1977-1978, Pastor Vladimir Reband paid snap visits to Ashkhabad to officiate in baptismal

services. Subsequently, Pastor Aleksandr Kondratov moved to Ashkhabad and worked there until 1980.

In 1981, the Church in Turkmenistan was included in the Asia-Transcaucasia Conference, which united local congregations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. In 1983, Pastor Vyacheslav F. Chubarov, with his spouse Dina and children, moved to Ashkhabad.

In 1983, the Asia-Transcaucasia Conference was reorganized into the Central Asia Conference

In 1988, the SDA Church in Ashkhabad was registered with the Council for Religious Affairs, and two years later, Pastor V. F. Chubarov registered the Adventist congregation of 20 members with the Ashkhabad city administration at the address of his house, where the worship services were held. In the summer of 1991, an evangelistic program was held in Ashkhabad, which resulted in the baptism of 12 more people. After the registration of the congregation, Pastor V.F. Chubarov applied for a plot of land for building a prayer house, and in 1992, after Turkmenistan had gained its independence, the authorities acceded to his request. In autumn 1993, the construction started, but in November of that same year, Pastor Chubarov died from a severe disease. A young Pastor Pavel M. Nikulshin took his place and served in Ashkhabad until 1996.

However, the church in Ashkhabad started facing serious difficulties during those years. In 1994, according to a new law, all confessions had to be re-registered, but the SDA Church was denied re-registration. The church applied for re-registration three times, but the applications were rejected for different reasons. In summer of 1994 the Adventist Church in Turkmenistan was denied permission to hold an evangelistic campaign. Meanwhile, the church membership was growing, and new baptisms took place.

In 1996, the government passed a new law on religious organizations that laid tougher claims to their registration. The law required having at least 500 founders, but the church in Ashkhabad could not present such a number of members.

On November 11, 1999, the Turkmenistan authorities gave orders to knock down the Adventist prayer house in Ashkhabad within one week. That chapel had been built for seven years and was almost finished. It was not officially put in commission, but all the utility systems were connected. On Friday, November 13, before the evening worship service, the demolition started. By that time, there were 80 members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Turkmenistan.

In 2001-2002, a lot of Adventist literature was confiscated in city of Turkmenabad (Chardzhou). Church members were facing pressure and threats. They were scared but kept in contact with each other and gathered in small groups of two to three people. They also came to Ashkhabad for celebrating the communion service. As time passed, people started to smuggle in Adventist books and periodicals. In June 2002, the worship services began in a small town Geok-Tepe. The Church kept on living and serving in Turkmenistan unofficially. Inasmuch it was often very dangerous to gather at houses of church members in groups of more than five people, the meetings were mostly held outdoors.

In 2002, the Turkmenistan Mission, headed by P. N. Fedotov, was organized. On May 31, 2004, the certificate of registration of the "Religious Group of Seventh-day Adventists in Turkmenistan" was finally granted. In 2004-2005 alone, Pastor Fedotov sent about 30 letters to different state institutions asking them to assist in buying or renting a building for holding worship services and meeting religious needs of Adventist believers, but his requests came to nothing.

In 2010, the Turkmenistan Mission was reorganized into Turkmenistan Field. As of June 30, 2020, the Turkmenistan Field, headed by Olga Kholopova, was comprised of one church and two companies with 96 members. The Turkmenistan Field is a part of the Southern Union Mission in the Euro-Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists.

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## 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. G. I. Lebsack, "Vtoroy s"ezd v Sredney Azii," *Golos Istiny*, no. 12 (1927): 28-32.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

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