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## **Kulakov, Mikhail Petrovich (1927–2010)**

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**IVAN V. LOBANOV**

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Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov was an Adventist preacher and president of the Euro-Asia Division of the Adventist Church (1990–1993). He was engaged in translating the Bible into Russian and served as director and editor-in-chief of the Bible Translation Institute at Zaoksky (Russia) and actively defended human rights and freedoms.

## Early Years

Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov, born March 29, 1927, in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), U.S.S.R. He was born into the family of the Adventist pastor Peter Stepanovich Kulakov (1896–1978), who moved to Tula in 1928, where the family lived until 1936 when Peter Stepanovich was arrested and exiled to Krasnoyarsk Territory.

On August 24, 1945, M. P. Kulakov was baptized in the city of Ivanovo, shortly after the next arrest of his father, and became the leader of the Adventist congregation in that city. In Ivanovo Kulakov finished an art school. In August 1947, together with his mother and brothers, M. P. Kulakov moved to Daugavpils (Latvia), where he was arrested on August 18, 1948, and transferred to the Ivanovo Investigative Prison of the Ministry of State Security.

In 1948--1953 M. P. Kulakov was imprisoned in the Gulag concentration camps of Mordovia and Kazakhstan. Later he recalled those years as an important university of life and thanked God for staying alive (his older brother, like many thousands of other prisoners, could not survive in the camp and died). That period of life was smoothed over for him with the opportunity to share the saving message with people doomed to death in the prison camps.

On March 18, 1953, M. P. Kulakov was released and sent to an eternal settlement in the village of Myrzykul in the Qostanay Region (Northern Kazakhstan). On November 7, 1953, he married Anna Ilyinichna Velgosha, with whom he lived for 56 years. They had six children: three sons and three daughters.

## Ministry

Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov served as a pastor in the city of Alma-Ata, where he was ordained as a preacher on May 3, 1958. At the end of 1958, he was elected an unofficial leader of Adventist churches in Central Asia. In view of persecution of believers, most particularly active lay members and pastors, the Kulakov family had to move from one place to another: from Alma-Ata to the village Akkul, Dzhambul region (1960), then to the town of Kokand (1962), and to the town Chimkent (1966). In October 1975 a group of Russian pastors sent a call to M. P. Kulakov to be a leader of Adventist churches in Russia, and, consequently, the Kulakov family moved to the city of Tula.

Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov was the first Adventist pastor who could visit the General Conference headquarters in the United States during the Iron Curtain period. The first time he was allowed to arrive, formally for family reasons (his aunt resided in the United States), in the New World was in November 1970.

In 1969 M. P. Kulakov graduated from the Moscow Pedagogical Institute (Faculty of English language), and the good command of English helped him communicate with fellow believers from other countries, as well as to serve as the interpreter at international meetings. He was a delegate to all General Conference sessions since 1975 GC session in Vienna. That same year he became the member of the GC Executive Committee and the member of the Academy of Adventist Ministers. In March 1977 delegates to the first official constituency meeting of Russia's Adventists elected M. P. Kulakov as the head of the Adventist Church in Russia.

Since 1980, as invited by the leadership of the World Church, M. P. Kulakov became the coordinator of Adventist mission in the Soviet Union, as well as a person responsible for uniting Adventist churches in the U.S.S.R. His power and authority were confirmed at a pastor's meeting in Tula in June 1985.

In 1990 the General Conference Session in Indianapolis (U.S.A.) voted to organize the Euro-Asia Division (ESD) of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the territory of the (now former) Soviet Union, with M. P. Kulakov as ESD president.

The new church organization needed educational facilities. For this purpose, in 1988 M. P. Kulakov founded the first Protestant seminary in Russia, together with his son Mikhail, who became the president of this educational institution. The opening of the seminary in the village of Zaosky, Tula Region, took place on December 2, 1988. In 1992 this seminary received state recognition and became known as the Zaosky Theological Seminary (ZTS).

In 1993 Mikhail Petrovich retired from his service as ESD president and founded the Bible Translation Institute (BTI) under the aegis of ZTS. From his young age, when he first saw other translations of the Bible in German, it was his cherished dream to give the Russian people the Bible in modern Russian. It should be noted that "modern" was understood not as a modernist or colloquial language but as an artistic language based on the richness of the Russian literary tradition. The scholars, who were invited to work in the BTI, completed the lifework of M. P. Kulakov after his death. The search for the right intonation and approach to translation took up a lot of time, until the first edition of the New Testament appeared in 2000. Two years later, in 2002, the New Testament with the Book of Psalms came out, and in 2009 the Pentateuch appeared in print. The last edition, on which Mikhail Petrovich had worked, "The Book of Daniel, and the Book of the Twelve or the Minor Prophets," was published in 2011. After the death of M. P. Kulakov, the Bible Translation Institute was headed by Mikhail Petrovich's son Mikhail Mikhailovich, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Oxford. Thanks to good managerial skills of M. M. Kulakov, the work on the translation of the Bible into Russian was completed in 2015, and the product of this major work was presented that same year at the General Conference Session in San Antonio (Texas, U.S.A.).

M. P. Kulakov was engaged in active public activities. He participated many times in world-peace congresses, such as the world conference "Religious Leaders for Lasting Peace, Disarmament and Just Relations Among Nations" (Moscow, 1977); the Fifth Christian Peace Conference in Prague (1978); the world conference "Religious Workers for

Saving the Sacred Gift of Life from Nuclear Catastrophe” (Moscow, 1982); the “Life and Peace Conference” in Uppsala (Sweden, 1983); the peace conference in Japan (mid-1980s); and the Chautauqua Conference on U.S.-Soviet Relations (U.S.A., 1987). In October 1987, M. P. Kulakov was appointed to be a member of the Board of the Soviet Children’s Fund, where he had the opportunity to cooperate with the famous writer, chairman of the said fund, Albert Likhanov, in moving toward the noble humane goals set by the fund.

On September 26, 1990, M. P. Kulakov was invited, together with Patriarch Alexy II, to participate in the meeting of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., where he outlined his views on a new proposed law on the freedom of religion. At the end of 1990, M. P. Kulakov had a personal meeting in the Kremlin with the U.S.S.R. President M. S. Gorbachev, who was seeking, at that time, support in the circles of believers and religious leaders of the country.

Having personally suffered religious persecution, M. P. Kulakov unceasingly spoke out in defense of religious freedom and took an active part in the work of international congresses dedicated to the protection of religious freedom. In 1992 he initiated the creation of the Russian Branch of the International Religious Liberty Association (RB IRLA). In the capacity of the RB IRLA as secretary general, M. P. Kulakov represented this organization in 1993--1995 before the authorities of the Russian Federation.

In association with an Orthodox priest, Alexander Borisov, M. P. Kulakov stood at the origins of the Russian Bible Society. Mikhail Petrovich possessed the rarest talent to unite the most diverse people for a good cause and create an atmosphere of true spiritual and intellectual freedom. Truly, he didn’t see the world as “us” versus “them.” One of his favorite biblical phrases said: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). In a time of Stalin’ terror, he learned from experience the taste of unfreedom.<sup>1</sup>

For his pastoral, educational, and social activities over the course of many years, M. P. Kulakov was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the Southwestern Adventist University in Georgetown (Texas, U.S.A.) on May 1, 1988, and by Andrews University, in Berrien Springs (Michigan, U.S.A.), on August 21, 2001.

## Later Life

For a number of reasons, M. P. Kulakov and his wife moved to the United States in December 2000, and the work of the Bible Translation Institute continued under complex conditions: Mikhail Petrovich had to maintain contacts with the staff remained in Russia only by e-mail. After his departure M. P. Kulakov came to Russia three times—in the summer of 2006, in January 2008, and in July 2009—for creative and business meetings with his employees and fellow believers. In the fall of 2009, it was found that M. P. Kulakov had a brain tumor. He received medical treatment in the clinic of the University of Loma Linda.

M. P. Kulakov died on February 10, 2010, at his home in Highland, California, USA, surrounded by loving family. On the day of his death, freshly printed copies of the new Russian translation of the Pentateuch, on which he had been working for the last five years, were delivered to the Bible Translation Institute at Zaoksky, which he created.

In one of his last interviews, Mikhail Petrovich said: “I am deeply concerned today by the underestimation of the importance of human freedom. We passed this difficult strip when they tried, like an asphalt roller, to crush flat any individuality and suppress freedom of expression. It is impossible and prohibited to let it go. This should be remembered by those who care about the well-being of their native country, about their children and descendants. Each of us must think what foundations are to be laid today so that our Russian society could live a full, joyful, and calm life, without anxiety that you might be suppressed and erased and not allowed to express yourself. It is very important. This can save us as a nation and as a country from the horrors that have been experienced.”<sup>2</sup>

## Publications by M. P. Kulakov

*Poslaniye Apostola Pavla khristianam v Rime* (The Epistle to the Romans), translated from Old Greek by M. P. Kulakov, Zaoksky: Bible Translation Institute, 1993.

*Novyy Zavet v sovremennom russkom perevode* (New Testament in Modern Russian Translation), edited and translated from Old Greek by M. P. Kulakov, Zaoksky: Bible Translation Institute, Cultural-Enlightenment Fund DIALOG, 2000.

*Novyy Zavet i Psaltyr’ v sovremennom russkom perevode* (New Testament and the Book of Psalms in Modern Russian Translation), edited and translated from Old Greek and Hebrew by M. P. Kulakov, Moscow: St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological Institute Publishing House, 2014.

*Pyatknizhiye Moiseevo v sovremennom russkom perevode* (The Pentateuch in Modern Russian Translation), edited and translated from Hebrew by M. P. Kulakov, Zaoksky: Bible Translation Institute, 2009.

*Kniga Daniila i Kniga Dvenadsati v sovremennom russkom perevode* (The Book of Daniel and the Book of the Twelve in Modern Russian Translation), edited and translated from Hebrew by M. P. Kulakov and M. M. Kulakov, Zaoksky: Bible Translation Institute, 2011.

*Bibliya. Knigi Sviashchennogo Pisaniya Vetkhogo i Novogo Zaveta v sovremennom russkom perevode* (Old Testament and New Testament Books in Modern Russian Translation), edited and translated from Hebrew and Old Greek by M. P. Kulakov and M. M. Kulakov, Bible Translation Institute (Zaoksky Theological Seminary), Zaoksky: Istochnik Zhizni, 2015.

Kulakov, M. P. and Kulakov, M. M., editors. *Bibliya. Knigi Sviashchennogo Pisaniya Vetkhogo i Novogo Zaveta v sovremennom russkom perevode* (Old Testament and New Testament Books in Modern Russian Translation). Joint Publication of the Bible Translation Institute (Zaoksky Theological Seminary) and St. Andrew's Biblical Theological Institute (SABTI), Moscow: SABTI Publishing House, 2015.

## 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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Suvorova, ?. ?. *My tolko stoim na beregu*. Moscow: Exmo, 2012.

## NOTES

1. "Mikhail Kulakov. In Memoriam," Blagovest Info, February 12, 2010, accessed June 20, 2021, <http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=3&id=32560.>
2. "Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov. In Memoriam," *Adventistsky Vestnik*, no. 2 (2010): 6.?

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