

Republic of Moldova

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Country Profile of Moldova (Bessarabia)

Moldova, officially the Republic of Moldova, is a state in Southeastern Europe that shares borders with Ukraine and Romania. Its area is 33,846 km², but *de facto* 12.3 percent of territory (unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic) is out of the government control.

The settled society in this territory appeared in the 9-11th centuries from the nomadic Scythians, Goths, and Huns. Before the 14th century, this territory was a part of the Kievan Rus', and then it belonged to the Golden Horde and other principalities. In the 14th century, owing to contacts between the Vlachs and the East Slavs, the Moldavian ethnicity was formed, and in 1359, the Principality of Moldavia appeared. That state included the regions of Moldova, Bessarabia, and Bukovina, with its capital in Iasi. From the 16th century, the Principality of Moldavia was part of the Ottoman Empire for over 200 years.

At the end of the 18th century, following the victory of the Russian army over the Turkish army in 1770 near the village Vulcănești and the liberation of Transnistria in 1791, the left bank area of the Dniester was joined into Russia. In 1812, under the terms of the Treaty of Bucharest, Bessarabia was also annexed to the Russian Empire. After the October Revolution, in January 1918, Bessarabia was joined to Romania while Transnistria remained a part of Ukraine and, in 1924, it was reorganized into the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR). After Bessarabia was returned to the Soviet Union in 1940, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was organized and existed until the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In 1990, the Republic of Moldova became an independent state, but a short time later in the fall of 1991, a civil war broke out in Transnistria. The result was that Transnistria, albeit being administratively a part of Moldova, proclaimed independence and established its own parliament.

As of January 1, 2017, the population of Moldova was estimated to be 3,550,900. The nation's capital is in Chisinau. Moldova is a unitary parliamentary republic, which is administratively divided into 32 districts, five municipalities, and one autonomous territorial entity (Gagauzia). According to 2004 population census data, the

majority of believers (about 93 percent) belong to the Orthodox Church.

The Spread and Development of the Adventist Message and the First Adventists in Bessarabia

The German colonists in Bessarabia distributed Adventist tracts, thus facilitating the spread of the Adventist message in this territory. In the summer of 1894, H. J. Löbsack visited, by invitation, settlements Neuburg near Odessa and Tarutino in Bessarabia where some of the Baptist brethren began to celebrate the Sabbath. Since the people wished to see him again, H. J. Löbsack decided to revisit Neuburg and Tarutino after a few months. In winter, having returned from the Volynia Governorate, H. J. Löbsack met with Gottfried Tetz in Odessa. Tetz was an elder of the Chigir congregation, who since then dedicated himself to preaching the gospel. H. J. Löbsack and his companions then went to Neuburg and Tarutino and stayed with the brethren for quite a long time.

Löbsack wrote about that visit: "In the Tarutino colony where Benjamin Schmidt's parents lived, one Friday night we were arrested right at the meeting. The bailiff gave us to a guard to watch over us in his apartment, because the prisoner's room was being rebuilt at that time. The guard turned out to be a Christian. He gave us his bed, and he himself went to sleep at the door. May God reward him for this! For our interrogation 15 witnesses were called, and since the very first of them in their testimonies called our sermons quite Christian, the other witnesses were allowed to go home without interrogation. After brother Kleist stood surety for us, we could choose at whose place to stay. For the whole month, being in the custody, we could visit our brethren in the village and arrange Bible discussions until we were given back our passports with a response from the highest police authorities, and thus we were released." In such a way, the first Adventist congregation in Bessarabia appeared... Whichever way Adventist missionaries took to disseminate the truth in new places, they were facing arrests and imprisonment. However, nothing could keep them from doing the labor entrusted to them by God!¹

The first constituency meeting of the new South-Russian missionary field was held on October 4 through 7, 1906, in the city of Bendery in Bessarabia where, two years before, an Adventist congregation had been already organized. That meeting was attended by 33 delegates and four Bible workers. H. J. Löbsack presided over the meeting, and the new field was headed by Daniel Isaak. The next constituency meeting of this field was held also in the city of Bendery in the hall of the St. Petersburg Hotel on September 13 to 17, 1907. L. R. Conradi, J. T. Böttcher, G. Del, O. Wildgrube, and H. J. Löbsack were present as the representatives of the union. The meeting was attended by 27 delegates and, together with the guests, there were about 100 people present. Although the field was serviced by only four ministers, 142 new persons joined the Church in over a year! The recommendations of the union were adopted so that from January 1, 1908, this missionary field should be reorganized into the South Russian conference. At the first public sermon, a district police officer and several inspectors were present, and during the next meetings, the police stood at the door to prevent any interference from outside. The representatives of the city authorities were present, too. It was the first case of this sort in

Russia that made a satisfactory impression on the public. The territory of the South-Russian Conference included Bessarabia and Kherson, Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav, and Tauria governorates, as well as the western area of the Don Cossack Host Province, with 474 church members.

In 1912, it was decided to divide the South-Russian Conference into the Azov Conference with 16 congregations and 393 members, chaired by K. A. Reifschneider, and the Black Sea missionary field, which included the territory of Bessarabia, with 11 congregations and 284 members, chaired by D. P. Gäde. After 1917, the Black Sea missionary field was headed by P. A. Sviridov.

The number of Adventists who lived in Bessarabia west of the river Dniester up to the river Prut (the territory retroceded to Romania) reduced after 1918. Although Adventist German congregations in cities of Bendery and Grigoriopol were depleted after World War I, some small companies remained. The eastern part of Bessarabia (now Transnistria) was reorganized into the Moldavian Autonomous SSR as a part of the Ukrainian SSR. The Adventist congregations within this territory were included in the Black Sea missionary field.

Gustav Arnhold's daughter Wanda remembers: "My father wanted to move to Germany, but brethren persuaded him to stay in Russia. Thus, our family went to the south of Russia by train – from Belarus through Kiev to Tiraspol. It was the year 1918. We were travelling to Moldova in a luggage wagon, along with other three families, with difficulty and for a long time. My father talked a lot to fellow travelers, and they prayed with us. Short of Tiraspol, the train was derailed, and only our wagon remained intact. Everyone, who was in the wagon, kneeled down before the Lord and thanked Him for the rescue."² Gustav Arnhold served as a missionary and a pastor in German settlements in the territory of modern Moldova for several years. In the 1920s, pastors L.L. Wojtkiewicz, I. Z. Pilkevich, F. A. Gaidischar, and others also served in Moldova.

Ivan S. Melnichuk remembers that in the late 1970s, Sister Paraskov'ya Yatsishina, from the village of Taşlic in Moldova, reported that in 1920s, she had accepted the Adventist message and kept it in her heart. After long wandering across Russia, she came back to Moldova, found Adventists there, and received baptism. The village of Taşlic is located 15 kilometers west of Grigoriopol. Also, 10 to 12 kilometers east of Grigoriopol, the village of Karmanovo lays where, before 1917, there was an Adventist congregation. A chapel that belonged to German colonists has survived to this day.

Ten years after the planting of Adventist congregations in Transnistria, a local church was organized in the north of Moldova in the village of Colicăuți by Anton Lupu, a Moldavian who had returned home from America before World War I. The Adventist message was brought to the neighboring village of Cuconeşti Noi by Pavel Wojtowski who returned from World War I. After a while, a company and then an Adventist church were organized in that village. However, the Orthodox Church that held a dominant position cruelly persecuted Protestant movements as heretical deviations. This was especially felt during the Romanian rule. It happened quite a lot that Protestant ministers, church leaders, and even lay members were falsely accused of carrying the ideas of Communism and judged by a military tribunal.

A new wave of preaching the Three Angels' Messages in Bessarabia (a part of Moldova, which was joined to Romania) came in 1920s, owing to the efforts of Romanian Adventist missionaries. In the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the North-Moldavian (Cernăuți) and South-Moldavian (Galați) conferences of the Romanian Union began to send their evangelists/missionaries and colporteurs (literature evangelists) to Bessarabia. Within a short period, three new missionary fields were organized in the territory of Bessarabia: Northern (Russian-speaking), Central (mostly Moldavians), and Southern (Bulgarians, Gagauz, and other ethnic groups). The North-Moldavian and South-Moldavian conferences sent their workers and colporteurs to Central missionary field. By the middle of 1930s, there remained only the Northern and Southern missionary fields in Bessarabia.

In the summer of 1932, the Cernăuți Conference sent Parfeniy Kostomsky, as a Bible worker, to the city of Bălți to supervise the Adventist churches in the villages of Zarojeni and Fundoja in the Soroca District. At the same time, Evangelist Alexander P. Popov was serving the most part of Moldova, including Chisinau and even to the south. At a later date, A. P. Popov, along with his wife Evgeniya, moved to the city of Bălți to replace Parfeniy Kostomsky as a preacher. He started a series of evangelistic meetings in the city and held regular worship services on Fridays in the evening and in the afternoon hours on Saturdays. In the summer of 1934, the first baptism took place in Bălți, resulting in organizing an Adventist congregation of eight members.

The Southern missionary field belonged to the South-Moldavian Conference that was headed by Constantin Popescu in 1929-1930. In 1929, a Romanian preacher-evangelist named Gheorghe Dașoveanu planted an Adventist church in the village of Romanovka. Rudolf V. Reinheimer, a German, served in the Romanovka church as an ordained pastor for six years.

In 1935, Preacher Ivan Danczos, a Romanian, replaced Pastor Rudolf Reinheimer. Before World War II, Preacher Nikolay Arkalevsky (Arkaliev) lived and served in the village of Basarabeasca. He was a Bulgarian and had seven sons.

In 1930s, a Gagauz Adventist church was organized in the village of Ciucur-Mingir in the south of Bessarabia, and in 1932, the first group of Gagauz people received baptism in the village of Dezghingea. In 1933, a chapel was constructed and more than once extended in that village.

In the very south of Moldova, the city of Cahul is situated. According to the magazine "Curierul Misionar," Adventists appeared in that city in the early 1930s. Colporteur Mihail Hioare and his spouse served there, and they were supported by members of Cahul church.

In 1940, Bessarabia became a part of the USSR, and the Moldavian SSR was formed. However, the war hampered the restoration of Adventist congregations. Adventists suffered both from military operations and the internal policy of the Antonescu regime. It was only in the autumn of 1946 that congregations that formerly belonged to the Romanian Union were registered. The chair of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, G. A. Grigoriev invited Alexander F. Parasey to Moscow where he was ordained, together with F. V. Melnik and A. G. Galladzhev, to pastoral ministry and then authorized by the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists to

serve as a senior pastor for Moldova and sent to Chisinau. In this way, the members of local churches in Moldova were united in the Moldavian Conference.

In the summer of 1956, a new chair of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, Stepan P. Kulyzhskiy, visited Moldova. Appealing to the representatives of many churches of the south of Moldova who came to the village of Basarabasca, and then to those who came from the north of Moldova to the city of Bălți, he introduced to them a new senior pastor for Moldova, Nikolai A. Yaruta, who replaced Pastor A. F. Parasey because the latter was transferred to Moscow to serve in the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists. By that time, there were 19 Adventist congregations and 1,237 church members in Moldova.

In December 1960, the Soviet authorities dissolved the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists. As a result, Nikolai Yaruta was deprived of his official status and had to find job in a business environment while privately serving the churches in Moldova. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, an underground church organization was actually established in Moldova. The first Bible workers were called to serve in the fields. In 1965, some of them were ordained to pastoral ministry. Although the centralized church organization was officially closed, the Moldavian brothers continued to maintain contacts and consult with the leading pastors of the former All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventist Institutions

The shortage of the Adventist literature made church members rewrite certain articles, and even entire books. Both adults and children (but mostly senior pupils) rewrote morning devotionals, Sabbath School lessons, psalms, poems, printed music, and especially the books by Ellen G. White. The early 1950s were marked by new repressions against Adventist ministers and active lay members. However, no draconian measures could prevent the work of God, who Himself was opening the doors to Russia. A lot of work was being done underground. The ministers took all responsibility not only for themselves but also for their families or relatives when involving them in typing the Spirit of Prophecy writings and other Adventist publications. They used old typewriters, such as Underwood, Olympia, or Continental that had been captured during the war. The typewriter keys had metal rims and, therefore, a typist had to hit the keys forcefully in order to produce 10 to 12 carbon copies by using very thin paper. In this way, a network of small self-publishing centers was organized.

Adventist Underground Seminary, Adventist Education in Moldova

In 1966, the unofficial administration of the Adventist Church in Moldova decided to begin regular classes to train ministers. By that time, the necessary teaching aids and textbooks had been translated from English, Latvian, and Romanian into Russian and Moldavian. The unofficial Bible institute, with six years of training, was headed by Pastor F. V. Melnik who, by that time, already lived in Moldova. Throughout its existence, this underground seminary trained over 100 Adventist ministers.

In 1995, the Adventist Theological Seminary was officially opened in the Moldova Union. In 1997, it was registered with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova as a higher religious education institution. The Moldavian Union appointed Yuri D. Yunak as rector of the Seminary. He was among the first graduates from the full-time department of Zaoksky Theological Seminary, who continued, by correspondence, his Master studies at the Department of Theology of Andrews University.

In November 1995, the first students were admitted to the Adventist Theological Seminary, and on December 2, 1995, a dedication of students was organized. Pastor Juan Prestol, the treasurer of the Euro-Asia Division, took part in that event. In September 1996, the second group of students was admitted to the Seminary, in July 1997 - the third group, and in July 1998 - the fourth group. On July 14, 1999, a graduation ceremony was held for the first students of the Theological Faculty of the Moldova Union Seminary. A total of 12 students received diplomas. In 1999, in accordance with the proposal of delegates of the union constituency meeting and by the decision of the union board, a correspondence department was opened with 20 students admitted. At the beginning of 2000, 76 students were being trained in the Moldova Union Seminary that was headed by a new rector, Pastor Grigoriy V. Pirozhok.

Administrative Units of the Adventist Church, Dynamics of Church Membership

The regular meeting of the board of Moldova pastors held in Bălți in 1976 decided to hold a constituency meeting of the Moldavian Conference to elect new officers. The constituency meeting was held at night. The next morning, the work of the nominating committee was finished, and the chair read out a list of candidates for the leadership positions of the Conference for the next two years. The proposed candidates were approved in the first reading. Ivan A. Gumenyuk was elected president, Dmitry O. Yunak was secretary, and Stepan N. Leahu became treasurer of the Moldavian Conference.

Things were also changing in the USSR. The next constituency meeting in Moldova was held twice: unofficially, in the autumn of 1978, and in the spring of 1979 with the consent of the authorities. Thus, the Adventist Church emerged from the underground in the rough conditions of the time.

At the subsequent constituency meeting held in January 1989, it was decided to organize a union conference by dividing the existing Moldavian Conference into two local conferences – the North-Moldavian and South-Moldavian conferences. The first officers of the Moldavian Union Conference were elected for a term of five years. They were chair (president) Grigoriy V. Kochmar and secretary-treasurer Ivan I. Zgera. The union office was located in the building of the Central Church in Chisinau. In the North-Moldavian Conference, I. A. Gumenyuk was elected as chair, and A. I. Darie as secretary-treasurer. In the South-Moldavian conference, S. N. Leahu was elected as chair, and A. Arabaci became secretary-treasurer.

As of January 1, 1990, there were all together 54 Adventist churches in the North- and South-Moldavian conferences with 4,453 members. In 1990, the Adventist Church in Moldova became a part of the USSR Division, which was organized in the same year at the 55th session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

In 2008, the Moldova Union Conference was reorganized into the Moldova Union of Churches (MUC). As of June 30, 2014, the Moldova Union of Churches comprised 152 churches with 9,604 members. As of this writing, Pastor V. I. Gruby is currently the President of the Moldova Union of Churches.

The Place of Adventists in Society

Since the first years of the ADRA operation in the ESD area, the Moldova Union has received humanitarian supplies. In 1995, clothes and food weighing 28,830 kg, at the total cost of \$51,400, were obtained from Bavaria through ADRA Germany. This humanitarian aid was distributed among church members in the churches of the city of Chisinau and partly in other regions of Moldova. All told, some 2,250 people received clothes and food.

In May 1996, 46,000 kg of clothes, footwear, and foodstuffs worth \$30,000 were also received from Bavaria and Lower Saxony through ADRA Germany and distributed in all regions of Moldova. In the same month, at the request of the South-Moldova Conference, a truck loaded with secondhand goods weighing 4,500 kg and worth \$2,614 was sent by ADRA Austria.

In September-October 1996, the project "Dine in Good Health" was implemented. Through the help of German sponsors, free meals for the poor and pensioners were served. In cooperation with three social welfare departments of the city of Chisinau and three Adventist churches, the lists of the needy persons were assembled. Within a month, 165 people were being served free meals. At the same time, ADRA Moldova provided assistance to the needy in Rîbnița, Camenca, and Dubăsari with the value of \$1,960. Similar programs were implemented by ADRA Moldova in the years that followed.

Since 2000, numerous relief programs have been carried out, including visits to elderly people at homes and hospitals. The Dorcas Society has taken an active part in those projects, with members preparing lunches and collecting clothes for the needy. Young people have actively participated in the organization of various programs, both within and outside the Church. The departments of Women's and Family Ministries have organized educational and edifying programs in local churches and public schools. In the Fall of 2014, a project called "Share the Bread" was launched. Under this project, church members once a week prepared and delivered hot meals to the sick, both believers and unbelievers.

A lot of work is also being done by Adventist chaplains in prisons and correctional facilities.

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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1. G. I. Lebsack. *Velikoye Adventistskoye dvizheniye i Adventisty Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii* (Rostov-na-Donu: Altair, 2006), 179-180.

2. W. G. Arnhold, "Pis'mo iz 1937 goda," *Marfa i Mariya Magazine* 1, 1997, 26-28.

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