

Armenia

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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.

Country Profile

Armenia is a country situated in Transcaucasia, in the north of and in the north-east of the Armenian Highlands. From the religious side the greater part of the religious population in Armenia (94 percent) are Christians belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹

Christianity was brought into the country about 34 A.D. A legend says that it was done by Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. In 301 A.D., Christianity was declared the state religion, and Armenia became the first country in the world that made this step. Thus, Armenia has a long Christian tradition, preserved even throughout the Middle Ages.

By the beginning of the 19th century, Eastern Armenia was a part of the Russian Empire (Erivan Governorate). This also played a role in the later spreading of Adventism in the region.

Background of Adventism Development in Armenia

In the 1830s, different eschatological questions were discussed in sermons in Molokan settlements in Samara, Saratov, Astrakhan, and Tavria governorates, and from there, they were brought further to the Caucasus, including Armenia. "Many Molokans celebrated Sabbath and adhered to Old Testament food prohibitions and so on."²

Joseph Wolf played a significant role in preaching the soon coming of Christ. From 1822 to 1845, he lived in Turkey (Istanbul and Erzurum), Russia (Crimea, Turkestan, South Caucasus), and Azerbaijan (village of Shusha), preached in Armenia near the mount of Ararat, and also visited Georgia (Tiflis) and many other places "preaching everywhere about Christ's coming."³

Thus, this formed the background for setting up the first Adventist congregations that were formed in Armenia by the end of the 19th century.

The First Adventists in Armenia

The transfer of exiled preacher Theophilus A. Babienko and seven other Adventists to Armenia allowed them to start proclaiming the Three Angels' Message in this mountainous country.

Theophilus Babienko was sent to Kheruzy, a village near the mount of Ararat. He preached to other exiled peoples, mostly Baptists and Molokans, and soon, over 200 people in the surrounding villages started observing the Sabbath.

In 1896, V. L. Zhukov and I. K. Kosmynin, who lived in Bazarchay, got to know the Three Angels' Message and started receiving Adventist tracts from Hamburg from Johann Perk. By the end of the same year in Bazarchay, there were about 100 people calling themselves Adventists even though they had not yet been officially organized into a congregation.

In 1904, Dr. Vagan Pampayan moved with his spouse and brother from America to Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia). He spent three years there studying Armenian, Turkish, and Russian, and he translated two Adventist tracts - "Prophetic Light" and "Is the End Near?" - into those languages. The translated tracts came out in a printing house in Tiflis, Georgia, as well as in a printing house at an Echmiadzin monastery in Armenia. Thanks to Dr. Pampayan's missionary efforts, five people accepted the Adventist message of which only one could receive baptism.

In Armenia, the Pampayan family lost their only child, who was buried near Echmiadzin monastery. In a short time, Dr. Pampayan's wife became seriously ill and had to leave for America, and in 1909, V. Pampayan left Armenia himself due to threat of persecution. After his wife had left, some persons attempted to kill V. Pampayan. They broke into his house, robbed him, took away and shattered all his medical equipment and personal belongings. V. Pampayan had a narrow escape, hiding in a policeman's house.

V. Pampayan was replaced by Bible worker Gukas Gassaryan, who was baptized thanks to the missionary work of Dr. Pampayan. In the spring of 1908, when G. I. Lebsack, a representative of the Caucasus Conference, first visited Armenia, particularly the village of Bazarchay, an Adventist congregation was established there. It was H. J. Löbsack, who baptized G. Gassaryan in Kars. Four years later, the Adventists in Bazarchay dedicated their house of prayer. Also due to G. Gassaryan's preaching, a Seventh-day Adventist congregation consisting of ethnic Armenians was established in the village of Nizhniy Khatunarkh.

Development of Organizational Structure

On January 1, 1903, the Asiatic Russian Mission was organized in the territory of Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Pampayan headed the Mission work. In 1908, the Caucasus Conference was organized, embracing the territory of North Caucasus and Transcaucasia. In 1914, Pastor Albert Ozol was sent there to preach the gospel in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Yepifan Gnedin joined Albert Ozol.

During World War I, G. Gassaryan was serving for the Asiatic Russian Mission. In 1917, he was elected as a chair of this field.

Influence of Political Developments on the Life of the Adventist Church

In November 1917, Armenia was occupied by Anglo-Turkish troops, and in May 1918, Armenia declared its independence. Half a year later, Armenian authorities submitted to terms of Russia, and thus the Armenian SSR was established.

In 1920, Ya. M. Pakhla headed the Transcaucasia missionary field and held this position until 1923. A year later, N. I. Klimenko continued the missionary work in Transcaucasia as a field president. In March 1925, Aleksey G. Gallajev moved to Tbilisi from Moscow to head the work in this region.

In 1922, Armenia became a part of Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, and in 1936, they joined the USSR. This made travelling all over the region easier for everyone, including Adventist preachers.

The History of the Adventist Church during the Soviet Period

The government repressions in 1930s destroyed many Adventist congregations, and public worship services stopped. The remaining believers went into hiding.

From 1946, interdiction that weakened worship services at highly depleted Armenian congregations were resumed.

In the summer months of 1956, worshippers used to meet together at Saak Galustyan's house, located at the fringe of the city of Yerevan. The fact that Armenian congregations were unregistered implied difficulties in communicating with the Adventist administration in Moscow. In the spring of 1957, pastors P. A. Matsanov and P. S. Kulakov visited Yerevan. The Church at that time had been suffering the outcomes of a split.

In December 1960, the Soviet authorities dissolved the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists, thus exacerbating the dissent in local churches that became autonomous. This affected the Church in Yerevan as well, leaving it with two leaders. As early as 1959, P. A. Matsanov sent Yakov Dmitriyenko to serve in Yerevan, and P. S. Kulakov, in his turn, invited Yerevan brother Ofsep (Iosif) Grigoryan, who had served in Central Asia. In 1967, Pastor I. M. Dreiling came to Yerevan at the invitation of P. S. Kulakov, and he served in that city up to 1977.

I. M. Dreiling remembers: "The split of the church greatly discouraged me. But for all that I managed to baptize twenty people during those hard times and helped Grigoriy Arutyunyan to make decision of converting from Baptism to Adventism. Later I helped Aramais Stepanyan and his family to join the SDA Church. I often visited

the prayer meetings of the Molokans and Baptists...In the Yerevan church there were still difficulties and disagreements. But God found the way to conciliate people in His Church. Meanwhile, David P. Kulakov came and settled down in Yerevan. The things were gradually improving. Albert Khachikyan was ordained to pastoral ministry. Short while later brother D. P. Kulakov was elected the chair of the Central Asia-Transcaucasus Conference."⁴

Pastor M. S. Begas was serving in Yerevan for three years, and in 1978-1979, Pastor V. Ya. Predolyak succeeded him. The two congregations in Yerevan (13 and 132 members, respectively) were merged only in 1981, after the restoration of the unified leadership in the Adventist Church in the USSR.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 affected the organizational structure of the Church in Armenia. On September 25, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia, basing on the results of a referendum, confirmed the independence of the state.

The History of the Church in Armenia in the Post-Soviet Period

In 1994, the Adventist Church in Armenia became part of the Transcaucasian Mission. In November 2001, a mission constituency meeting in the city of Rostov-on-Don organized the Caucasus Union Mission that included the Armenian Mission.

By the end of 2001, the Armenian Mission comprised 14 local churches with 954 members. Ten years later, there were 17 local churches with 896 members.⁵

On December 22, 2004, a dedication of the Spiritual Center of the Armenian Mission of the SDA Church was held in Yerevan.

In 2008, the Trans-Caucasus Union Mission was organized. It was headed, at different times, by Vigen Khachatryan (2001-2009), Doug Hardt (2009-2011), and Artur Galstyan (2011-2015).

The local churches in Armenia are currently a part of the Trans-Caucasus Union of Churches (TCaUC). The TCaUC officers include Vadim Kovtyuk (president), Mikhail Skripkar (secretary), and Vasiliy Garashchuk (treasurer).

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) is actively working in Armenia. The ADRA branch offices implement agricultural projects, supply food products to the regions where the population suffers from hunger and malnutrition, provide clothes to the people in need, and give assistance in emergency situations and during natural disasters.

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. "Армения," [Wikipedia \(Russian\)](#).
2. A. Yu Grigorenko. *Eskhatologiya, millenarizm, adventizm. Istoriya i sovremennost'*. St. Petersburg: *Evropeyskiy Dom*, (2004): 261, 270.
3. D. O. Yunak. *Vozvozhu ochi moi k goram. Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Zakavkazye*, in the author's personal collection (2012): 11, 12.
4. I. M. Dreiling. *Vospominaniya i opyty. Zaokskyi: Istochnik Zhizni* (2003): 62–64.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, The Official Directories (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015), 83.

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