

# Uzbekistan

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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

Uzbekistan is a country situated in the central part of Central Asia. It borders Kyrgyzstan in the east, Kazakhstan in the northeast, north, and north-west, Turkmenistan in the southwest and south, Afghanistan in the south, and Tajikistan in the southeast.

From 1709 to 1876, a part of contemporary Uzbekistan belonged to the Khanate of Kokand populated by people from the Uzbek Ming tribe. By the time the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire began, there were three states in the Uzbekistan territory: the Khanate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Kokand, and the Khanate of Khiva. In 1876, the Khanate of Kokand was defeated by the Russian Empire and ceased to exist, and its central territories were incorporated into the Fergana Region.

By the early twentieth century, Central Asia was part of the Russian Empire. In the 1920s, the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbek SSR) became a constituent part of the Soviet Union with the capital in Samarkand. On September 1, 1930, the capital of the Uzbek SSR was transferred from Samarkand to Tashkent.

On September 1, 1991, the Republic of Uzbekistan proclaimed its independence. According to official data, 93% of Uzbek people are Muslim (mainly Sunnis, Shiites do not exceed 1%), four percent are Orthodox Christians, and the remaining three percent are Roman Catholic, Korean Christian, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventist, and other religions.

## Background of Adventism in Uzbekistan

According to G. I. Lebsack, the precursor for acceptance of Adventism in Turkestan at large was the Bahai movement.<sup>1</sup> Between 1882 and 1884, Bahais, fleeing persecution from Shia clergy men and authorities, made their home in the Turkestan region of Ashkhabad, which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the number of Bahais in this town reached one thousand. The Russian authorities used to oversee 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 familiar to people in the region including Uzbekistan.

## The First Adventists in Uzbekistan

The first official reference to Seventh-day Adventists in Uzbekistan dates back to 1906, when a group of believers settled in villages of the Khodjent District in the Samarkand Region. In 1909, after organizing the Central Asia Missionary Field, the head of the Adventist Church in Russia, J. T. Böttcher, took a trip from Orenburg to Tashkent—a city in which brother J. G. Ebel worked and lived with his family—where there was a small company of fifteen Adventists. In his recollections, J. T. Böttcher wrote: "I stayed in Tashkent from Friday to Sunday, arrived there in the evening, and left early in the morning. In the city there is still no church except for a small company numbering 15 that was organized from the scattered members of this field."<sup>4</sup> An Adventist Russian-speaking church in Tashkent appeared a year later, and in 1911 it consisted of some 150 members.

In the spring of 1912, Pastor G. I. Zierath was sent to Central Asia from Tiflis (Tbilisi). In the first place, he visited, together with a brother Jacob G. Ebel, the church in Tashkent and then came to the city of Samarkand where he began his ministry from July 10.

## Development of Church's Organizational Structure

Acting in charge of the European Division, to which the Central Asia Missionary Field was attached after the beginning of the First World War, Pastor A. Ozol visited Central Asia in 1914. Through Krasnovodsk, across the Caspian Sea, he traveled to the Persian seaport of Bender-Gas in order to organize a congregation from among the German settlers living there. This trip resulted in planting a community of eighteen members in Kars. Ozol also visited the cities of Ashgabat and Samarkand.

After 1917, there were more than 450 church members in Tashkent, Samarkand, and other areas in Uzbekistan.

In 1920, the Eastern Union committee decided to organize six independent unions in the territory of the former Russian Empire. Those unions included the Caspian Union to which the Turkestan Missionary Field was attached. In September 1920, G. A. Ostwald was transferred from Orenburg to Tashkent to assume leadership of the Turkestan Missionary Field. Later, I. T. Klimenko was appointed chair of the Turkestan Missionary Field, and H. K. Lebsack took charge of the Caspian Union.

In 1925, the Central Asia Conference, which was a part of the South-Eastern Union, was organized, with its headquarters located in Tashkent. At that time, the Central Asia Conference united seven churches and three companies with 330 believers and 352 Sabbath School members. In 1925, Pastor G. A. Arnhold was transferred to serve in Tashkent where he found a problem-plagued church, which, due to its commitment to false teachings, had to be dissolved and then organized anew. In early 1926, G. A. Arnhold temporarily headed the Central Asia Conference and was succeeded by K. F. Remfert in July 1926. At the end of October 1927, the 2<sup>d</sup>

constituency meeting of the Central Asia Conference, chaired by G.I. Zierath and K.F. Remfert, was held in Tashkent.

## Influence of Political Processes on the Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventists in Uzbekistan were not immune to the repressions of the 1930s. In 1936 during an anti-religious campaign, the leaders of the Tashkent church, including K. F. Remfert, were arrested and convicted. The repressions almost completely destroyed the organizational structure of the Church in this region. Congregations held worship services in secrecy, believers gathered in small groups, the number of ministers was insufficient, and new baptisms were sporadic. It was only in 1953 that the situation somewhat improved.

In 1954, Kazimir Korolenko, who had been serving in Tajikistan, was transferred to Tashkent and appointed director for the work in Central Asia at large. However, in 1958 he was arrested and sentenced to eight years of imprisonment. After the arrest of Kazimir Korolenko, the denominational work in Tashkent was headed by Vasilii Khrapov, and in 1960s by Andrey Fris. At that time, the authorities started to register the religious communities including Seventh-day Adventist churches. In the 1970s, the churches in Fergana, Termez, Angren, Akhan-Garan, Samarkand, Denau, and other populated areas were registered.

In 1978, the Church decided to organize the Asia-Transcaucasia Conference, which united local congregations in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. From 1978 to 1983, D. P. Kulakov served as president of the Asia-Transcaucasia Conference. A reorganization took place in 1983, and the Uzbekistan congregations were included in the Central Asia Conference that was led until 1988 by Artur F. Stele, who was succeeded by D. P. Kulakov.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new independent states affected the ministry of denominational organizations. In 1994, the Central Asia Conference was reorganized. It included local churches in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. From 1994 to 2002, this conference was led by Robert G. Geibel. Four years later, in 1998, the churches in Tajikistan were organized into a separate mission. From 2000 to 2002, the headquarters of the Central Asia Conference, directed by Rubin R. Ott, was located in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

In 2002, the churches in Uzbekistan were reorganized into a separate structure, the Uzbekistan Mission, with Vladimir I. Yavorskiy as its president. In 2007, he was succeeded by Andrey T. Ten. In 2010, the Uzbekistan Mission was reorganized into the Uzbekistan Field and headed by Yuriy I. Rybalkin followed by Andrey T. Ten in 2015.<sup>5</sup>

The Uzbekistan Field is a part of the Southern Union Mission. As of the end of 2017, it comprised ten churches and six companies with 661 members. The country's population was 30.7 million.

## Adventist Institutions and the Place of Adventists in Society

Through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the Church provides humanitarian assistance, including food, clothes, and medicines, to low-income, needy families and disaster victims in Uzbekistan, as well as promoting a healthy lifestyle.

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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. H. J. Löbsack, "Vtoroy s"ezd v Sredney Azii," *Golos Istiny*, no. 12, 1927, 28-32.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. J. T. Böttcher, "Iz Evropy v Aziyu," *Maslina Magazine*, no. 2, 1910, 25.

5. "Uzbekistan Field," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Nampa, ID: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015), 82.

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