

Kazakhstan

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Country Profile

Kazakhstan is a country in Central Asia that borders in the north and west on Russia, in the east on China, and in the south on Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, Kazakh tribes started the process of joining the Russian Empire, which was completed in the 1860s. In the twentieth century, the territory of modern Kazakhstan was a part of the RSFSR, but in 1925 it was reorganized into the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR). In 1936 the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR), as a constituent part of the Soviet Union with the capital in Almaty, was established. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country became an independent state.

Background of Adventism Development in Kazakhstan

According to H. J. Löbsack, the prerequisite for friendly acceptance of Adventism in Turkestan (the territory of modern Kazakhstan) at large was the Bahai movement.¹ "In 1882–1884, the Bahais, running away from persecution from Shia clergymen and authorities, made their home in the Turkestan region—in Ashkhabad, which at that time was a part of the Russian Empire."² In the late nineteenth century, the number of Bahais in this town reached one thousand. The Russian authorities used to patronize the Bahais living across Central Asia.³ The Bahai eschatological expectations made the message of Daniel's prophecies about Christ's coming more known by local citizens, including people in Kazakhstan.

Another prerequisite for the spread of the Adventist message was that Germans from the Volga region moved to the territory of contemporary southern Kazakhstan at the end of the nineteenth century.

The First Adventists in Kazakhstan

The first Adventists appeared in the south of Kazakhstan in the late nineteenth century in the village of Konstantinovka (now the village of Derbisek in the Shymkent Region), 25 kilometers away from Tashkent.

Several German families, who had moved from the European part of Russia, received some Adventist booklets and, upon accepting the biblical truth, started celebrating the Sabbath. After a short time, Adventist congregations were organized in Akmolinsk (now Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan) and Auliye-Ata (now Taraz), and this made it necessary to invite Adventist ministers. After a while local residents also started to join the Adventist Church.

In January 1907 the church decided to organize the East Russian Missionary Field that also included the Central Asia regions and was headed by H. K. Löbsack.

Development of the Church's Organizational Structure

The first official data about Adventists in Kazakhstan appeared in the published reports of the Russian Union for the second quarter of 1908: Auliye-Ata (now Taraz)–24 believers and 36 Sabbath School members; Semipalatinsk–25 believers and 25 Sabbath School members.

After his moving to Omsk in 1909, H. K. Löbsack traveled from Siberia, through Semipalatinsk and Auliye-Ata, to Tashkent. In Semipalatinsk he organized a church with 18 members that included 10 Germans and 8 Russians. Brother Tittel from Rudnya (Saratov Region) was invited to serve in Semipalatinsk as a local elder. Several church members from Rudnya also moved to that city. To get from Omsk to Semipalatinsk, they had to travel over a thousand kilometers along the Irtysh River and then to take horses to cover a significant distance to their destination.

On January 1, 1911, the Siberian Union Mission was organized, headed by Gerhard P. Perk. By that time there were 91 Adventists in Central Asia. Three local churches were included in the Turkestan Missionary Field while the Siberian Union Mission was split into the West Siberian Field, with the headquarters in Irkutsk, which included Kazakhstan churches, and the East Siberian Field with the headquarters in Harbin.

In spring 1912 Pastor G. I. Zierath was sent to serve in Samarkand. On May 25 he, accompanied by brother Jacob G. Ebel from Tashkent, visited the village of Konstantinovka, and from there, accompanied by brethren Philipp Trippel and Heinrich Ott, they went to the village of Orlovka, where they “stayed for nine days, had blessed gatherings, and could baptize several souls and celebrate the communion service that included the ordinance of foot-washing.”⁴

In July 1912 brother H. K. Löbsack visited Semipalatinsk again and, together with brother Jurikson, traveled throughout Altai to visit scattered church members. At the end of 1913 Gerhard P. Perk returned to Germany, and the churches in Siberia were placed under the supervision of the European Division.

In 1914 G. I. Zierath moved from Uzbekistan to the city of Akmolinsk (now Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan). After the beginning of the First World War, the authorities seriously restricted not only religious but also economic freedom. The Germans were forbidden to settle near railway lines. In the summer of 1914, G. I.

Zierath visited a small Adventist congregation in the mountains near Karkaralinsk, consisting of seven families. They were exiles; it fell out that a local Orthodox priest had informed the governor that they were allegedly saboteurs, which resulted in their being exiled from European Russia to Kazakhstan without any further investigation. Their new settlement lay more than 120 kilometers away across the steppe from the nearest railway station. In winter those families were actually isolated from the whole world and surrounded by high snowy mountains.

In Akmolinsk G. I. Zierath was persecuted and had to hide for eight months near the Sary-Su River. But this saved him from an exile to the northern regions of Russia.

Influence of Political Processes on the Adventist Church

After the fall of the tsarist regime, many exiled believers were released and returned to normal life.

In 1917 Otto Reineke became the new chair of the Siberian Union Mission. After a while he was succeeded by J. J. Wilson, who headed the Siberian Union Mission until 1922. From 1914 to 1920, H. K. Löbsack was elected, at different times, as chair of the West Siberian Field and Central Asia Field.

In March 1923 Pastor Ludwig L. Wojtkiewicz was transferred to Petropavlovsk because of the shortage of ministers in Siberia. But the next year he was arrested by the Unified State Political Department (OGPU) and investigated over a period of two and a half months, whereupon he was deprived of electoral rights. In 1925 Ludwig L. Wojtkiewicz chaired the West Siberian Conference during four months.

In 1925 the Adventist Church in Kazakhstan consisted of five German-speaking and five Russian-speaking churches and companies, with more than four hundred members. In Alma-Ata (Vernyy) a church was organized by Pastor F. M. Ostapenko, who baptized six people.

On November 17, 1925, H. J. Löbsack, together with Johann Friedrich Ginter, paid a visit to the colony Tobolino (former Konstantinovka), about thirty kilometers away from Aulie-Ata, founded more than twenty-five years before by German colonists who had moved from the Volga region and Siberia. At that time there were some eighty members in Tobolino and some thirty members in the village of Stepnoy. Brethren H. J. Löbsack and J. F. Ginter held worship services in both places. As remembered by H. J. Löbsack, "the prayer house, built by the community in Tobolino for 250 people, turned out to be too small on the very first evening."⁶ Unfortunately, after 1928 the prayer house was closed, turned into a club-house, and later demolished.

In 1926 a new reorganization took place aiming at the consolidation of the unions. The Central Asia Field was renamed Central Asia Conference and included in the Eastern Union headed by G. I. Zierath. Gustav A. Arnhold was elected the chair of the Central Asia Conference and then succeeded by K.F. Remfert, who chaired the conference until 1928.

In February 1928 the Central Asia Conference was reorganized. The churches of East Kazakhstan were included in the Upper-Irtysh Conference, with the headquarters in Semipalatinsk, which was chaired by Ivan A. Gaidischar until 1930. Some church members lived in remote places that one could reach only by horse riding.

Despite the repressions of the 1930s, I. A. Gaydichar continued his ministry in enormously severe conditions of East Kazakhstan, having a job as a medical assistant at an orphanage in the village of Maleyevsk. On August 20, 1937, he was arrested. At the time of arrest, the police confiscated photographs related to his ministry and participation in the sessions to which he was a delegate. On November 30 of the same year he was sentenced to death. The execution was carried out on December 2, 1937.

In the 1930s many pastors and lay members lost their freedom or were exiled. H. K. Löbsack was arrested in 1934 in Auliye-Ata, convicted, and soon died in custody. The church had to perform its ministry in the underground.

With the outbreak of the war in 1941, Russian Germans with their families were relocated to Kazakhstan and Siberia. Many of them were conscripted into the labor army to work in camp conditions. After the war Adventist congregations in Kazakhstan were serving unregistered and, for this reason, could not officially maintain contacts with the church headquarters in Moscow. Nevertheless, in 1953 Pastor Kazimir A. Korolenko was sent by the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists (ACSDA) to Central Asia to serve, inter alia, for the churches in Kazakhstan. In 1958 he was arrested and sentenced to eight years of imprisonment.

Mikhail P. Kulakov, after serving his sentence in Kazakhstan, superseded K. A. Korolenko and from 1959 to 1975 served as a senior preacher for Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The ministers who had survived and returned from prisons continued their ministry in private. D. D. Gomer served in Kazakhstan from 1958 to 1980. Yugan A. Danilson, who lived in the city of Kemerovo in the 1960s, moved after his exile to Central Asia, where he was serving for many years. Willi W. Nymmik served as a senior preacher in Northern Kazakhstan from 1962 to 1971. Ivan P. Velgosha also conducted his ministry in Northern Kazakhstan in 1971–1974. The territory of Northern Kazakhstan, just like Central Asia, was partly supervised by the ministers of the Siberian Field.

After 1978 the Adventist Church in the USSR was permitted to officially elect ministers. In 1978 the Kazakhstan Conference was organized and officially registered. Its first president became Rostislav N. Volkoslavskiy, who served until 1988. The subsequent presidents of the Kazakhstan Conference were Ilya I. Velgosha (1988–1990), Friedrich G. Ziegler (1990–1993), Alexander F. Schwarz (1993–1994), and Andrey F. Schwarz (1994–2000). In 2000 the Kazakhstan Conference was reorganized and divided into two entities: Northern Kazakhstan Conference and Southern Kazakhstan Conference.

The next reorganization took place in 2010 when both local conferences were transformed into missions. As of the end of 2017, the Northern Kazakhstan Mission comprised 31 churches and 10 companies with 1,410 members, and the Southern Kazakhstan Mission comprised 14 churches and 10 companies with 995 members.

Both missions are constituents of the Southern Union Mission.

Adventist Institutions and the Place of Adventists in Society

The church has been conducting programs in prisons, aiming at helping convicts in their intention to start a new life. However, such activities are currently restricted by law. The church also organizes social adaptation centers and defends the rights of people oppressed for their religious beliefs.

With the assistance of ADRA Kazakhstan, social programs are being implemented, and assistance is provided to disaster victims, as well as to orphans and children in need.

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. G.I. Zierath, "S Kavkaza v Srednyuyu Aziyu," *Maslina* Magazine Supplement, no. 2 (1913): 29, 30.

5. G.I. Lebsack, "V Sredney Azii," *Golos Istiny*, no. 4 (1926): 28-31.

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