

# Tajikistan

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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

Tajikistan is a landlocked country that is geographically situated in the foothills of Pamir. Tajikistan is the smallest Central Asia country with Dushanbe as its capital city. It borders Uzbekistan in the west and northwest, Kyrgyzstan in the north, China in the east, and Afghanistan in the south. Tajikistan is located far away from the main Eurasian traffic streams. About 93 percent of the country's landscape is mountains. Though the country is rich in natural resources, difficulties in their extraction have resulted in a poorly developed infrastructure and rugged relief. It is worthy of note that Tajikistan is the only Iranian-speaking state in the former Soviet Central Asia. Most people in Tajikistan are Sunni.

The history of Tajikistan dates back to the epoch of the Samanides. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Tajikistan was possessed by Turko-Mongolian rulers. In the 1860s, the northern districts of Tajikistan were further annexed by the Russian Empire. Following the 1917 October revolution and the establishment of Soviet power, the territory of Tajikistan was struck by civil war.

In the first half of 1920s the anti-Soviet movement that was fighting for the restoration of the Khanate of Bukhara, suffered defeat. In early 1990s, the political developments resulted in the fall of the Soviet Union and that led to the formation of new independent countries. In 1991, the Republic of Tajikistan victoriously declared its independence.

## Preconditions for Spreading the Seventh-day Adventist Message

The first Protestants in the territory of contemporary Tajikistan were the two Baptist elders: Bulgakov and Leshchev, who were deported by the Soviet authorities in 1929. They, together with their families, settled down near Dushanbe and became the main body of a new Baptist congregation. The religious life of this congregation was vehemently interrupted by the act of government repressions in 1937 and was triumphantly restored only in 1943.

In the 1940s, about 40,000 Germans were deported from different regions of the Soviet Union. Most of the exiled persons were members of the Lutheran church.

## The Spreading, the Development of the Adventist Message, and the First Adventists in Tajikistan

In 1929, the first Seventh-day Adventists, Brothers Ivan and Vasiliy Kozminin, were sent to Tajikistan!<sup>1</sup> During the 1930s, the exiled German Adventists further organized the first Adventist congregation. The Russian Adventists appeared in Tajikistan in 1931. The pioneers included the families of Pavel Zhukov (born in 1905) and Vasiliy Borisov (born in 1896), who were exiled from Transcaucasia. They were followed by other exiled Adventists.

In a short time, Adventist believers who were collective farm workers, officially started to assemble to conduct worship services. In the absence of ordained preachers and elders, a group of brethren (about 150 in all) was well organized and kept the Sabbath holy. Practically all the collective farmers were Seventh-day Adventists. Church leaders V. I. Borisov and P. I. Zhukov appointed the time and place of each worship service while managing both collective farms and their congregation. For some period of time, that group of believers could successfully avoid the wave of Stalin's repressions. On March 1, 1936, they officially elected Anton Zubkov, who came from Kyrgyzstan, as a church leader. He took care of the congregation from 1936 through 1940.

In 1937 to 1939, the wave of repressions in Tajikistan affected the fate of many Seventh-day Adventists who were exiled and never came back. After the year 1940, the surviving Adventists settled down in the cities of Hissar Valley: Ordzhonikidzabad (now Vakhdat), Regar (now Tursunzade), Stalinabad (now Dushanbe), and others. Statistically, the central church in city of Hissar numbered some 100 members.

In 1942 to 1943, Seventh-day Adventist believers faced difficult times and could assemble only in small groups. In 1943, Brother Vasiliy Maksimov (born in 1892) got into contact with G. A. Grigoryev, a chair of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists. According to Grigoryev's advice, a local church was organized in Tajikistan. In 1944, 26 new members were baptized and joined the congregation. In 1945, Yakov Zhukov was elected the local elder, and in 1946, Pastor Korolev came from Stavropol to serve the Church. In 1949, Brother Konstantin Zubkov was elected the local elder.

In early spring of the year 1953, Pastor K. A. Korolenko visited Tajikistan, and then, in 1954, he moved to the city of Stalinabad (now Dushanbe) as his permanent residence. K. A. Korolenko ordained Brother K. Zubkov as an elder and was in charge of denominational work in the Central Asia countries. In 1958, he was arrested and sentenced to eight years of imprisonment. However, the light of the gospel kept on shining, and local elders continued their ministry.

In 1966 to 1976, the Adventist Church in Tajikistan was led by Roman Wagner. Pastor D. A. Matern was serving in Dushanbe from 1966 to 1973. The year 1975 was marked with divisions and lack of unity among church

members in Tajikistan. However, by the grace of God, pastors who came from Siberia revitalized the Church. Pastor A. R. Link, who was serving in Tajikistan, initiated the construction of a chapel in Dushanbe. The construction work involved all the lay members and pastors including D. A. Grenz, V. V. Matryashin, A. V. Zhukov, and A. N. Gerasimov.

At different times, the Adventist congregations were served by pastors A. F. Steele and I. M. Dreiling. M. P. Kulakov, who was responsible for churches in Central Asia, visited Tajikistan on several occasions.

In 1978, the Asia-Transcaucasia Conference, that also included Seventh-day Adventist churches in Tajikistan, was organized. D. P. Kulakov was elected as a chair of this Conference.

Following the independence of Tajikistan, many Germans and Russians left the country. As a result, the number of Seventh-day Adventists declined considerably.

In 1998, the Church decided to organize Tajikistan Mission that was headed by V. V. Matryashin.

In 2010, Tajikistan Mission was reorganized into Tajikistan Field. As of June 30, 2014, Tajikistan's population amounted to 8,266,000 while the Tajikistan Field comprised three local churches with 193 members. The Tajikistan Field was led by Edward A. Dylev. In 2015, there was only one local church in Dushanbe with 120 members. The Tajikistan Field officially has an office in Dushanbe and is a part of the Southern Union Mission as of this writing.

## The Influence of Political Processes

Tragically, the cases of discrimination, persecution, and acts of terrorism against Protestants have become more frequent in contemporary Tajikistan. Persons who converted from Islam were even victimized by their own relatives and neighbors.

On December 31, 2001, an explosive device went off at the entrance of the Adventist church in Dushanbe. The building was severely damaged, but fortunately no one was killed or injured. Moreover, a law on religion that was adopted in 2009 made it very difficult to register religious communities. In January 2011, the Parliament subsequently passed a law on mandatory state censorship of any religious literature. Furthermore, in July 2011, a law from 2009 imposed a ban on the teaching of religion to children.

## Adventist Institutions

In 2006, a Children's Education Center was opened by ADRA Tajikistan in Dushanbe. This Center has been specifically designed for about 128 children, and it incorporates computer classes and English language courses.

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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. Gary Land, "Tajikistan," *Historical Dictionary of Seventh-day Adventists* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 291.

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