

Azerbaijan

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Country Profile

Azerbaijan is situated in eastern Transcaucasia and is bordered in the east by the Caspian Sea. The country is mostly populated by the Azerbaijani, but there are also Russians, Jews, Armenians, and other ethnic groups. The capital, the city of Baku, is a large international seaport. Some 30 percent of Azerbaijan's area is mountainous terrain that includes the Greater Caucasus Mountains in the north, the Lesser Caucasus Mountains in the southwest, and the Talysh Mountains in the southeast. The Kura-Araks Lowland lies in the central part of Azerbaijan, and the Lenkoran Lowland in the southeast. The climate varies from moderate to subtropical. The main rivers are the Kura and the Araks.

From the 10th century B.C., the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan was part of such ancient states as Mana, Midia, Atropatena, and Caucasian Albania. In the 13th and 14th centuries A.D., that territory was under the control of Iran and the Arab Caliphate. The Azerbaijani nation ultimately emerged in 11 to 13th centuries. During the 11-14th centuries, those lands were invaded by Seljuk Turks, Mongol Tartars, and Timur armies. In the 16-18th centuries, Azerbaijan fell under the rule of Safavids and was torn apart by Iran and Turkey. In the middle of the 18th century, the Azerbaijan territory included more than 15 feudal states that were dependent on Iran.

In 1813 through 1828, Northern Azerbaijan (Baku and Elizavetpol governorates) was incorporated into Russia. In the late 19th century, Baku became the country's largest industrial center. In 1917, Soviet power was established in Azerbaijan and it was reorganized into the Azerbaijan SSR in 1920, then incorporated into the Transcaucasian Federation (TSFSR) in 1922. Ultimately, Azerbaijan became a Union Republic, a part of the USSR, in 1936.

Religion Background

Far back in the past, the Azerbaijani were fire worshippers. Even in the present day, we can find pagan idols on the Maiden Tower, not far from the quay in Baku. Christianity came to Azerbaijan as early as the latter half of the first century A.D. However, in the 7th century Islam was forced on local people by Turkish and Iranian colonialists. Those not willing to adopt Islam were imposed by unreasonable taxes.

Because of its situation between the Orient and the Occident, Azerbaijan became a confluence of various cultures and civilizations. At all times, various religions have coexisted peacefully in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani have always honored and revered God. Azerbaijan is a country populated by the followers of Mazdaism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (including Protestantism). Azerbaijan is a multi-ethnic country, but cultural or national differences have never hindered its nations from respecting and wishing each other well. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan became a sovereign state and a CIS member. Today, Islam is the dominant religion in Azerbaijan, but Christians and followers of other confessions, including Seventh-day Adventists, have the freedom of belief as well.

Preconditions for Spreading the Adventist Message

The teaching of Johann Bengel, a German theologian who predicted the end of the world would occur in 1836, made some Germans establish their colonies with members awaiting the Second Coming of Christ from the east, in Caucasus, in the early 1840s. In 1822, Christian missionary Joseph Wolf, who was born in Bavaria, published a book, "He will Come Again, or the Son of Man in the Clouds of Heaven." He spent many years preaching to people about Christ's love and His coming in glory. Between 1822 and 1845, Joseph Wolf travelled through Africa, Asia, and Western Europe. He also came to Azerbaijan (in the village of Shusha), preached near Mount Ararat, and visited Georgia as well as many other distant places to preach about the Second Advent.

The Molokans, along with their spiritual teachers, believed that Christ would come soon to establish the Thousand Year Kingdom in a new Jerusalem, a holy land located somewhere in Russia that was close to the mountains in Ararat. Their faith was spreading in the Saratov and Tavria governorates as well as in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia to where the Molokans, regarded by Russian authorities as heretics and sectarians, were exiled. By the close of the 18th century, the Molokans were split into those who still observed Sunday and Sabbatarians.

Spreading and Development of the Adventist Message and the First Adventists in Azerbaijan

Jacob Klein was the first Adventist preacher to enter Azerbaijan. In November 1894, he was invited to come to Baku where there were some German families who observed the Sabbath. For a few days, he baptized seven people and conducted their communion service. One of the first Russian Adventist congregations was a church in the village of Shusha that was included in the report of the Middle Russian Mission in 1902.

In 1906, 34 inhabitants of the village of Novo-Vasilyevka, located close to the Caspian Sea, started keeping the Sabbath. It was the result of the visit of an Orthodox missionary who suggested an elder and a deacon of a local Baptist congregation explore the Biblical Sabbath. They communicated with Adventists, and thus was organized

a new Russian Adventist congregation.

An Adventist congregation in Baku was officially organized in 1910 as result of the efforts of a Latvian missionary Albert Ozol. According to official church membership data, in the first quarter of 1911 there were nine members in Baku, six in Karyagino (church established in 1909), six in Lis'i Gory (church established in 1910), and nine in Novo-Vasilyevka (a church established in 1907). As a matter of fact, in 1908 the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan had as many as 38 members.

In the "Statistical Information on Sectarians" of January 1, 1912, which was published by the Religious Affairs Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, Section III "Adventists" included the Elizavetpol Governorate (the city of Gyandzha) and Section V "Number of Non-affiliated Adventists as per the Law of October 17, 1906" reported of 133 Adventists including 13 in Baku.²

In the late 1920s and 1930, Pastor Luka Vasilievich Zhukov was serving the Adventist congregations in the cities of Baku, Kirovabad (Gyandzha), Karyagino (Fizuli), and other nearby places. In 1937, L.V. Zhukov moved to Baku, where his relatives lived, but soon he was arrested and convicted. He was taken into the prison located in the fortress of "Bailovo" in Baku. In the same year, L.V. Zhukov was executed.

From 1957 to 1976, the Adventist Church in Azerbaijan, including a congregation in Baku, was headed by P. S. Kulakov, who had settled in Baku after being released from jail. Aside from P. S. Kulakov, denominational services in Baku were conducted by P. I. Zhitnikov, who was the senior pastor for Azerbaijan from the year 1977, and P. A. Katsel, who was ordained by P. S. Kulakov to minister as an elder in Baku congregation. In 1976, upon Kulakov's departure from Baku, Zhitnikov was appointed to work as senior pastor for Transcaucasia, and he served in this capacity until 1988. Ivan Ivanovich Uklein was also a pastor for the Baku congregation, and after 1988, he was responsible for all Adventist churches in Azerbaijan. The elders for Baku congregation also included Igor Veniaminovich Gospodarets and Pavel Mikhailovich Nikulshin.

In 1957, Anatoliy Sergeevich Noga, a pastor from Ukraine, came to Gyandzha and, after a short time, the local church membership increased to 40. He served there until 1982, and after his death, the ministry was continued by his son-in-law, Anatoliy Stepanovich Zhalovaga. In 1988, A. S. Zhalovaga left Gyandzha for another field, and the ministry in the local church was conducted, over the next couple of months, by Pavel Yakovlevich Dmitrenko. He, in turn, trained a young minister named Rasim Bakhshiev who then took charge of the church, which by then was numbering about 70 members. During the years of his ministry (1990-1996), the membership doubled to 139. From 1996 to 2001, the pastoral ministry in Gyandzha was conducted by Ivan Petrovich Zavrishko who also planted one more church. In 2001, Pastor Rasim Bakhshiev returned to Gyandzha and took charge of both churches.

Outline of Denominational Organization and Church Membership Dynamics in Azerbaijan

In 1984, Azerbaijan became part of the Trans-Caucasus Conference that was later reorganized in 1989 to the Asian Caucasian Conference, which was headed by David Petrovich Kulakov.

In 1994, the Trans-Caucasus Field (subsequently renamed the Trans-Caucasus Mission) of the Euro-Asia Division was created and was chaired by Ilya Ivanovich Velgosh. In 1998, I. I. Velgosh was replaced by V. I. Sazhin, who served as mission president until 2001. In 1999, the Trans-Caucasus Mission had 1,952 members, 17 churches, six pastors, and 20 evangelists.

The Caucasus Union Mission constituency meeting that was held in Rostov-on-Don from November 6 to 8, 2001, reorganized the Trans-Caucasus Mission into 3 independent local missions (to serve each Transcaucasia country). Ivan Petrovich Zavrishko was elected president and Shamil Adylievich Shikhaliev secretary of the Azerbaijan Mission. The first constituency meeting of this new mission was held December 5 and 6, 2001, during which the departmental directors were elected. During that time, the rejuvenation of ministers in Azerbaijan continued, and the Azerbaijan Mission numbered 605 members, five churches (3 churches in Baku and 2 in Gyandzha), seven companies, and nine pastors.

The Azerbaijan Mission presidents: Ivan Petrovich Zavrishko (2001-2010), Elshan Samedov (2010-2012), and Vadim Filippovich Kovtyuk (2013-2015). In 2011, the Azerbaijan Mission numbered six churches, seven companies, and 729 members.

As of June 30, 2014, the Azerbaijan Mission numbered five churches and 526 members. In 2016, the local churches in Azerbaijan were integrated into the Trans-Caucasus Union of Churches (TCaUC). TCaUC president currently is Vadim Filippovich Kovtyuk, secretary – Mikhail Aurelovich Skripkar, and treasurer – Vasiliy Nikolaevich Garashchuk.

Place of the Adventist Church in Society

Among Adventist institutions in Azerbaijan, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) enjoys the highest profile since they render aid to the poor and provide emergency disaster assistance.

In 2003, the Church created plans for establishing a cultural center, and that included an aesthetic education school in city of Baku; beginning Arabic language courses, a Bible correspondence school, a premarital and family counseling office, a youth club, an audio recording studio, a media center, a publishing house, and a missionary school. It is hoped that a community center will make it possible to conduct evangelistic programs, exhibitions, and seminars, and organize fundraising dinners, Christian concerts, and music festivals.

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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