

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Baptists in Volhynia

by

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1859 – Beginning of the Baptist Movement in Volhynia

Although Baptists began migrating to Volhynia as early as 1859, the floodgates did not open until the early 1960s with the granting of economic freedom of the Russian serfs in 1861. Gottfried Friedrich Alf (1831-1898), pastor of the German Baptist Church in Adamowo, Poland, is generally considered to be the founder and progenitor of the Baptist movement in Russia (Volhynia). Although Alf made his first missionary journey to the area as early in 1862, the first Baptist Church was not officially founded until May 19, 1864. By then the church already had a membership of over 200. Three days later, on May 22, 1864, Alf led in the establishment of the second Baptist church in Sorotschin with 250 members.

Because of the evangelistic fervor of the Baptists and spiritual neglect of the Lutherans, the church spread rapidly, with the formation of a dozen churches, 69 preaching stations, 49 choral groups, nine orchestras and 14 youth groups scattered throughout Volhynia. Although the number of baptized believers never reached more than 15,000 baptized believers, the Baptists were an exceedingly virile force.

1879 – Recognition as a Legal Religious Body

On March 17, 1879 the German Baptists in Volhynia were given legal status as a religious body. This had a number of benefits:

First, they now had the right to register their own births, marriages and deaths with the civil authorities, instead of with the Lutheran Church and in some instances with the Catholic and Orthodox churches. This was a relief to the Lutheran Church as they hated this added burden. Prior 1879 the Baptist pastors could, of course, record such data on their own, which they did, but it had no legal status. There are many such instances where a marriage, birth or death was attested to by the local Baptist pastor before the Baptists were given legal status. Such records were scrupulously kept in "church books" housed in the church itself or pastor's study. Now, in addition, they were required to send a copy of the record to the civil authorities. The church records were usually written in German, although Polish and Russian was also used occasionally, depending on the pastor's ethnic heritage. Up until now no one has located any of the Baptist church books. What happened to them is anybody's guess. I have searched for the records in the state archives of Zhitomir, Rovno, Lutsk, Kiev, Odessa and Berlin. Nothing. No doubt many of the records were destroyed during the war or carried out by the retreating Germans and eventually lost.

Second, they now had the right to build their own houses of worship and schools, though the law still required that they obtain permission to do so from the Government. Often this took a long time with many denials before official permission was granted. For example, the Baptist Church in Nowo Rudnia became self-supporting in 1884, but it was not given permission to construct a new building until 1908, though the church applied for permission each year.

With these rights, however, also came the requirement that pastors take an oath of allegiance to the Government. Perhaps this is why some of the churches carried a motto on the walls of their churches, which read "Fear God and Honor the Tsar."

1887 – Formation of the Union of Baptist Churches in Russia

In September 1887 the Union of Baptist Churches in Russia was formed in Neudorf. Alf was one of the special speakers for the occasion and was chosen as its first president, an office he held until his death. Prior to that the churches in Volhynia were members of German *Bund* or Union in Germany, which was the supreme organization binding several regional organizations together. But at the triennial convention of the German *Bund* in Berlin in 1885, the representatives from Russia announced their need for a separate Union of Baptist churches in Russia. There was some resistance to the idea, primarily from the representatives of the German *Bund*, but Alf defended the decision to form such union in Russia. He based his arguments on the distance from Germany (some 700-800 miles), the difficulty of getting a pass and its high cost, and the ability to promote better mission work. He said that he favored separate mission funds, but that the other funds should remain undivided. When others also argued in favor of a separate union, the German Union agreed, aside from the mission fund, to keep its other funds open to the churches in Russia and wished them God's riches blessing.

1899 – Publication of German Church Periodical

In 1890 *Der Hausfreund* (Friend of the House), a German church periodical, was published in Riga, Latvia by the German Baptist Union in Berlin. It initially appeared the previous year under the name *Der Hirtenbrief* (*The Pastor's Letter*) and was edited by Julius Hermann. The periodical was widely circulated in the German Baptist churches in Germany, Poland and Russia (Volhynia). In 1915, with the advance of the German Army and deportation of the Germans to Siberia, the periodical was discontinued until 1920. In 1920 it was resurrected and published in Lodz. Distribution in Russia, however, was limited to Polish Volhynia. In 1926 *Der Familienfreund*, its counterpart was published in Odessa and distributed only to the churches in Russian Volhynia.

1915 – Abandonment of the Baptist Churches

In 1915, with the expropriation of land and deportation of the Germans to Siberia and Central Asia, the people had no choice but to abandon their houses of worship. Because the area was re-settled by the Galacians, many of the churches were taken over by them. However, upon return of the Germans in late 1917 and subsequent years, and with the help of the German Army, the Germans were able to reclaim most of their churches, even though they had sustained considerable damage. Soon the entire Baptist movement was thriving once again, in spite of the lack of workers, literature and finances. There were many spiritual awakenings, which resulted in numerous conversions.

1925 – Formation of the All-Ukrainian Union of Association of Baptists

In May 1925 an “All-Ukrainian Union of Association of Baptists” was formed. The union was comprised of both Ukrainian and German Baptists. After the union was registered with the *Commission of Internal Affairs*, the German section or branch was given permission to publish its own religious periodical, print calendars, issue a new hymnal and open a theological school for the training of ministers. In the latter part of November 1925, the German Baptists held their first and only General Conference in Odessa.

Three years later the Communist Party began to restrict the activities of the churches and harass the pastors. By the end of 1928, the denominational periodical *Der Familienfreund* (Friend of the Family) was forced to cease publication and in 1930 the GPU (Secret Police) arrested the top three denominational leaders and closed down the Baptist seminary, printing office and denominational headquarters.

1937 – Closure of the Baptist Churches in Russian Volhynia

In the early 1930s the Government started arresting the pastors and closing down the churches in Russian Volhynia. Because Polish Volhynia was not under the control of Russia at that time, the repression did not affect the churches in that area. That came later with the invasion of Poland by Germany. But in Russian Volhynia the churches were closed one by one until the church in Zhitomir, led by Eduard A. Hornbacher, was also closed at the beginning of 1937. This occurred after the arrest of Hornbacher in the spring of 1936 when the church could no longer afford to pay the ever-increasing taxes imposed by the Government.

1939 – End of the Baptist Churches in Polish Volhynia

In September 1939, with the invasion of Poland by Hitler, the churches and pastors in Polish Volhynia, came under similar fire as in Russian Volhynia. Some of the pastors were arrested and the churches put in jeopardy. Finally, in late 1939 and early 1940, when the Germans were re-settled to Occupied Poland, all the churches were closed. Robert L. Kluttig, pastor of the Baptist

church in Porozow, was the last pastor to leave on February 2, 1940. And with that the Baptist movement in Volhynia ended.

1941 – Re-Opening of the Churches in Russian Volhynia

In 1941, two months before the German invasion of Ukraine, Hornbacher was allowed to return to Zhitomir from a five-year term in a Gulag. Almost immediately, upon the occupation of Ukraine by the German Army, the churches in Volhynia were again opened and permitted to function. During this time, from 1941 to 1943, Hornbacher, the only remaining German Baptist pastor in Volhynia, was the leading voice in a great spiritual revival in the Zhitomir region. Hundreds of people, mostly young adults, were baptized in a single service.

1943 – End of the Baptist Movement in Volhynia

In November 1943, with the retreat of the German Army and the resettlement of the Germans to occupied Poland, the Baptist movement in Volhynia ceased to exist. Today there are few Germans remaining in Volhynia and no German Baptist churches, only Ukrainian.

End.