

They maintained that they were entitled to do this under Islamic law. The fact that the government took no notice of this line of argument, brought the criminals to trial, and convicted them, was a shock to the Shi`i community. The Bahá'ís were, of course, jubilant, and Bahá'u'lláh commended the action of the Russian government. It was the first time in the history of the Bahá'í Faith that an attack on one of its members had been dealt with justly. The trial had one other major consequence. During the trial, the judges ordered the different religious communities to sit separately. This was the first occasion on which many who had secretly been Bahá'ís openly identified

themselves. It was also the first occasion on which official recognition was given by any government body to the Bahá'í Faith as a religion independent

of Islam. The Bahá'ís intervened on behalf of the two who had carried out the crime and had their death sentences commuted to life imprisonment.

This action was also praised by Bahá'u'lláh.

One of the consequences of the episode of the assassination of Haji Muhammad Rida was that the Bahá'í community was forced to develop its own social institutions. As the community grew, these became more and more sophisticated. A traveler's hospice, and a dispensary and hospital were built. In 1312/1894, a boys' school was founded and a building for this was completed in 1897. A cemetery was also acquired. The culmination of these efforts was however, the building of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkar (q.v.).

On 31 October 1902, work was started on the project under the supervision of Haji Muhammad Taqi Afnan, Vakilu'd-Dawlih. The foundation-stone was laid by General Subotich, the governor-general of the province, in November 1904, and the outer structure was completed by 1907, although it was 1919 before the building with its extensive external decorative work was completed. It was the most imposing building in Ashkhabad. Other institutions such as a girls' school (1907), two kindergartens (1917-18) and a Bahá'í Reading Room and Library were added. All of these institutions were clustered around the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in precisely the way envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá in their writings.

The social structure of the community was developing also. By 1902 there were about one thousand Bahá'ís in Ashkhabad. The leading figures included a group of merchants: Mirza `Abdu'l-Karim Ardibili, Mashhadi Yusuf Milani, Haji `Abdu'r-Rasul Yazdi (Aliov), Aqa Muhammad Rida Arbab Isfahani (Kazemov), Aqa Husayn `Ali Ahmadov, and Mirza Ja`far Rahmani (Hadiov). This group was known by the Russian term "Khozyain" (the "bosses"). Intellectual leadership

was provided by some of the leading scholars of the Bahá'í Faith. Mirza Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygani (q.v.), his nephew Sayyid Mahdi Gulpaygani, Shaykh Muhammad Nabil-i-Akbar (q.v.), and his nephew Shaykh Muhammad `Ali Qa'ini (q.v.) all spent periods of time in Ashkhabad. They were perhaps the leading Bahá'í intellectuals of their time, and with their presence in Ashkhabad, the city became a major center of learning and intellectual life in the Bahá'í world.

In 1313/1895-96, the Bahá'ís of Ashkhabad elected a Spiritual Board of Counsel (Mahfil Shawra Rawhani), possibly the first such elected body in the Bahá'í world. Its name was later changed to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Ashkhabad. Although several of the prominent merchants and intellectuals were elected onto this body, others such as Ustad `Ali-Akbar Banna (a builder) were also elected. A number of committees were also appointed, including a women's committee, a youth committee, and committees to run the social institutions.

Because the law prohibited Christians from converting to other religions, there was no attempt to teach the Bahá'í Faith to the Russians resident in Ashkhabad. Nevertheless, a small number, such as Mr. Lankovitch, did become Bahá'ís. Mirza Habibu'llah Isra`ili succeeded in teaching the Faith to some sixty Jews in a regiment from Poland. Two of these, Ya`qub and Varsil, insisted that their new religion be registered formally by the authorities. They sent a petition to the government, prompting the reply that it was only Slavs who were prevented by law from changing their religion.

2. After the Revolution of 1917. At first, the Communist Revolution did not have a detrimental effect on the Bahá'í community. Activities were expanded, publications increased, and, freed from the legal restriction against converting Christians, the Bahá'ís began to teach the religion to Russians. As many as five hundred attended public meetings convened for this purpose. Although there was some state-sponsored anti-religious propaganda, this only served to bring the Bahá'í teachings to public attention.

The first decade after the Russian Revolution thus marks the apex of the development of the Ashkhabad Bahá'í community. The community numbered some four thousand, of whom one thousand were children (perhaps 3% of the world Bahá'í population at this time). They were mostly merchants, shopkeepers, and craftsmen, but an increasing number were going to university and joining the emerging professional classes. A National Spiritual Assembly of Turkistan was elected in 1925.

Gradually, however, the attacks on the Bahá'í community increased in intensity. From 1926 onwards, a close watch was kept on Bahá'í activities.

Then, in 1928, the police began to raid Bahá'í meetings, arrest Bahá'ís, and confiscate Bahá'í communal assets. A particular focus of attack was the youth committee, whose activities had rivaled those of the officially-sponsored

Komsomol youth organization. In 1928, the temple building was confiscated, although then leased back to the Bahá'ís; in 1929, the schools were closed, and in the same year some of the Bahá'ís were arrested and exiled to Siberia. There was some easing of the situation in the early 1930s, but on 5 February 1938, the final blow came. There were at this time some 1,400 families of Bahá'ís resident in Ashkhabad. The authorities suddenly arrested every adult male Bahá'í. The women and children were deported to Iran, while

the men were either also deported or sentenced to long terms of imprisonment or exile. Many were sent to Pavlodar, in Northern Kazakhstan (Siberia). The temple building was again confiscated and made into an art gallery.

3. Recent developments. The survivors of the exile to Siberia returned to Ashkhabad in 1956. Among those who kept the Bahá'í Faith alive in Ashkhabad was Mr. `Ali-Akbar Naji. Although no formal meetings were allowed, he kept in touch with all of the remaining Bahá'ís informally. Whenever possible and when he could get a visa, he would travel to Germany to visit relatives and meet with the Bahá'ís there. In 1963, the building of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, having suffered damage in an earthquake, had to be pulled down.

The progress of the Bahá'í Faith in Turkmenistan was the responsibility of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran from 1964. In 1979 this responsibility was transferred to India, and then to Germany in 1986. It was in Ashkhabad that the first local spiritual assembly in the Soviet Union was elected when conditions permitted at Ridvan 1989. Sixty-one Bahá'ís were listed as eligible for election. Hand of the Cause Ali Akbar Furutan (q.v.) visited Ashkhabad for two weeks in early 1990 immediately after the election of the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Moscow. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Ashkhabad was officially registered by the City Council of Ashkhabad was given on 31 January 1990.

The local spiritual assembly has been active, meeting regularly and establishing classes for children and deepening the knowledge of the Bahá'ís with the help of many traveling teachers and visitors from abroad. One of its first projects was to find a Bahá'í center for the community to meet.

4. Marv (Mary). This ancient city, situated about 300 kilometers from Ashkhabad, had an active Bahá'í community and a local spiritual assembly in early years of the twentieth century. Among those who moved to this town were Aqa Rahmatu'llah and Aqa Asadu'llah Namdar, two Bahá'ís of Jewish background from Khurasan. Ibn-i-Asdaq (q.v.) spent some years in this city. When the Bahá'ís of Marv heard of the construction of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in Ashkhabad, they wrote to `Abdu'l-Bahá for permission to build one in Marv also. `Abdu'l-Bahá gave permission and a much smaller building was constructed.

In September 1990, Mr. Habibullah Namdar, a Bahá'í from Frankfurt, Germany, revisited the place of his birth. He met with members of his family and found that there were enough Bahá'ís to form an assembly. He deepened the knowledge of the Bahá'ís about the Bahá'í administration and, on 23 September

1990, twenty-six Bahá'ís gathered together for the election of the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Marv to be formed in recent times.

5. National Spiritual Assembly. By September 1991, there were about 125 Bahá'ís in Turkmenistan with two local assemblies and two groups

(in Balakhanli and Bayranali). When the National Spiritual Assembly of the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1992, a Regional Spiritual Assembly for the whole of Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) was formed with its seat in Ashkhabad.

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