



# Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev (1858–1937): A Shaper of Siberian Baptist Life

## Constantine Prokhorov

Dr Constantine Prokhorov is the historiographer of the Association of the Evangelical–Baptist Churches of the Omsk Region, Siberia.

constprokhorov@gmail.com

### Abstract

The article describes the life and works of G. I. Mazaev (1858–1937), the founder and first chairman of the Siberian Baptist Union. The attractive image of a ‘Protestant saint’, a passionate preacher who converted thousands of people to God, is presented to readers today thanks to the surviving archival documents and numerous testimonies of contemporaries. Deprived of his fortune, freedom, and then life itself under Soviet rule, Mazaev kept his faith to the end.

### Keywords

Molokans; Mazaev family; Siberian Baptist Union; A. V. Kolchak government; Soviet power; repressions

## Context: The Molokan Background

Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev<sup>1</sup> was born in 1858 in the village of Novovasilievka, Berdyansk uyezd, Taurida (Russian Empire) into a prosperous Molokan family. Several generations of his ancestors were successfully engaged in sheep breeding. The ‘Mazaevskaya’ breed of fine-fleece sheep, which they bred, became widespread in the south of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. During that period, the members of one Mazaev family had up to 200 000 sheep.<sup>2</sup>

There are several versions of the origin of the word ‘Molokane’. According to one, the word goes back to the name of the Molochnaya River in Taurida. It was in this vicinity in the 1820s that, along with other

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed biography, see K. Prokhorov, *Kakoy bogach spasetsya. Zhizneopisanie Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva (1858–1937)* [What Rich Man Will Be Saved: Life Story of Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev (1858–1937)] (Samenkorn, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> *Istoriya narodov Severnogo Kavkaza, konets XVIII v. – 1917 g.* [History of the Peoples of the North Caucasus, late 18th century – 1917], ed. by A. Narochnitsky (Nauka, 1988), p. 391.

religious freethinkers from Tambov province, the ancestors of the Mazaevs were deported because they had fallen away from Orthodoxy. A more probable explanation for the word, however, is connected with the literal and allegorical interpretation of the word ‘milk’ (*moloko* in Russian). The first followers of the new religious movement were accused of breaking fasts, during which these ‘heretics’ dared to drink milk. This was the first instance of the use of the pejorative word *Molokany*, probably with the intention of hurting these simple people. However, the nickname was not rejected and it took root as the people filled it with a more *spiritual* content. Molokan elders often repeated the words of Holy Scripture (1 Pet 2:2), ‘Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.’<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the double origin of this name, from the word ‘milk’ in the literal and figurative senses should be recognised as correct. The Molokans themselves more often called themselves *Spiritual Christians*.

Molokan culture in the nineteenth century was astonishing compared to the general Russian background. Novovasilievka had its own literate people who read and interpreted the Bible; many inhabitants of this large village hurried to meetings in several local prayer houses after their usual peasant labour. Drunkenness, smoking, and ribaldry were practically absent here. Stealing was unthinkable. Quarrels or scandals were extremely rare. Mutual help was common in the village; neighbours treated each other respectfully and addressed each other by name and patronymic, especially people of the older generation.<sup>4</sup> I. I. Mazaev described his childhood in Novovasilievka as follows: ‘We had no drunks, no thieves, no smoking tobacco [...] everywhere the Molokans were believed.’<sup>5</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the religious beliefs of the Spiritual Christians, due to their close contact with the rapidly growing and multiplying communities of Stundists and Baptists in Ukraine and the Caucasus, were seriously tested. Gavriil Ivanovich

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, I. Yuvachev, ‘Zakavkazskie sektanty’ [Transcaucasian Sectarians], *Istoricheskiy Vestnik* (St. Petersburg), 95 (1904), p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> G. Kanibolotskiy, ‘Istoriya poselka Novovasilievki Priazovskogo raiona Zaporozhskoy oblasti’ [History of the Village of Novovasilievka, Priazov District, Zaporozhye Region] (manuscript, 1997), vol. 1, p. 186.

<sup>5</sup> *Dnevnik Ivana Ivanovicha Mazaeva* [Diary of Ivan Ivanovich Mazaev] (Kharkov, 1910), p. 10.

Mazaev and his older brother Dey Ivanovich left Molokanism in 1884. It was not an easy choice. Molokan communities in Orthodox Russia, which had experienced persecution, lived united and usually ostracised those who betrayed the faith of their fathers. It is known that for a long time Ivan Gavrilovich Mazaev threatened to leave his son Dey Ivanovich without an inheritance. A similar fate could have awaited Gavriil Ivanovich.<sup>6</sup>

Under such circumstances, it seems surprising that the Mazaev brothers maintained a benevolent attitude towards Molokanism to the end of their lives.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Spiritual Christians themselves did not fully reject them. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the Baptist Mazaevs published articles in Molokan journals. These publications were remarkably tolerant, allowing in their writing even the most sensitive dogmatic positions to be challenged.<sup>8</sup> Above all, these challenges concerned baptism and the Lord's Supper, which the Molokans usually interpreted 'spiritually' (allegorically), while the Baptists insisted on their literal understanding and fulfilment.

In 1886, Dey Ivanovich, a very influential and gifted man, was elected to the presidency of the Union of Russian Baptists. During this period, Gavriil Ivanovich, who had been invited to serve as treasurer of the same Union, was in the shadow of his famous brother. Nevertheless, Gavriil Ivanovich began his zealous preaching activities. For this reason, the local authorities in the Don region once demanded that he give them a written statement promising not to tell others about his religious beliefs. This was because he was not an official priest and his preaching

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva' [Memoirs of Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev], ed. by N. P. Khrapov (manuscript, archive of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (ARUECB)), pp. 24–27.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the article by D. I. Mazaev, which was a kind of 'hymn of love' to Molokanism: D. I. Mazaev, 'Molokanstvo' [Molokanism], *Molokanin* (Tiflis), 4 (1910), pp. 12–19. Academician L. N. Mitrokhin noted that 'the Baptists of Mazaev's model largely retained continuity with Molokan "eldership"'. See L. Mitrokhin, *Baptists: History and Modernity* (RHGI, 1997), p. 378.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the articles by G. I. Mazaev: 'Proshu otvetit' [Please Answer], *Dukhovnyi Khristianin* (St. Petersburg), 7 (1909), pp. 27–28; 'Vopros Baptistov' [Questions from Baptists], *Dukhovnyi Khristianin*, 11 (1909), pp. 11–12, and 'Nuzhna li byla smert' Khrista dlya spaseniya mira?' [Was Christ's Death Necessary for the Salvation of the World?], pp. 58–59 of the same issue; 'Beseda dukhovnogo khristianina s baptistami' [A Conversation Between a Spiritual Christian and Baptists], *Dukhovnyi Khristianin*, 1 (1910), pp. 8–11.

was not Orthodox. Gavriil Ivanovich’s reply was striking: ‘I will give you an undertaking (a written document) that I will not steal and get drunk [...] but I cannot give the undertaking that I will not preach the Gospel.’<sup>9</sup>

## Life and Ministry in Siberia

In 1904, Mazaev unexpectedly moved to the Akmola region, and there, in the Siberian expanses, the full extent of his personality and Christian gifts were revealed. Soon afterward, he moved his family to join him there. Little is known about the reasons that prompted Gavriil Ivanovich to make such a decisive change of life, although some sources mention his illness and the need for a change of climate<sup>10</sup> as well as his entrepreneurial interest in the then-new Siberian market.<sup>11</sup> Be that as it may, these concomitant factors made it possible to fulfil what became truly central to his life following his calling to missionary ministry, namely to spread evangelical Christianity in Siberia and Central Asia.

From the time of the early Church, believing people had asked the question, ‘What rich man will be saved?’<sup>12</sup> The stern warnings in the gospel<sup>13</sup> seemed to leave little chance for such a one to live a full spiritual life. Nevertheless, Mazaev’s life was a rare example not only of how a wealthy man (or ‘rich man’<sup>14</sup>) could become truly sacrificial — to help those in need, to donate for the cause of God — but also of how in a

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva’, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva’, p. 239; *Bratskiy vestnik* [Fraternal Bulletin] (Moscow), no. 5 (1988), p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Omskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti* [Omsk diocesan bulletins] (Omsk), no. 10 (1904), p. 30; no. 19 (1910), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance: Clement of Alexandria, ‘Beseda o tom, kakoy bogach spasetsya’ [A Discourse on the Rich Man Who Will Be Saved], in *Sbornik propovednicheskikh obraztsov* [Collection of Preaching Samples], compiled by P. Dudarev (St. Petersburg: I. Tuzov, 1912), pp. 7–18.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Woe unto you that are rich!’ (Luke 6:24); ‘the camel and the eye of a needle’ (Matt 19:24), etc.

<sup>14</sup> Sources of the early twentieth century repeatedly refer to G. I. Mazaev as a millionaire. By 1912 he owned land plots of about 10 000 hectares, houses, mills, and so forth. Mazaev’s elite cattle were among the winners at the First West Siberian Agricultural Exhibition in Omsk in 1911. See *Pamyatnaya knizhka i adres-kalendar’ Akmolinskoy oblasti na 1912 god* [Memorable Book and Address-Calendar of Akmola Region for 1912] (Omsk, 1912), p. 203; *Vestnik Pervoy Zapadno-Sibirskoy vystavki* [Bulletin of the First West Siberian Exhibition] (Omsk), nos. 12 and 15 (1911).

Christian way, without malice, he could lose his estate and become a martyr for the faith.

As early as 1903, Gavriil Ivanovich received permission from the Economic Board of the Siberian Cossack Troops for a long-term lease of land plots near Petropavlovsk. He then transported several thousand sheep and hundreds of cattle there by railway from the Don region.<sup>15</sup> In documents before 1909, Mazaev is listed as a resident of Krasnoyarsk volost of Ishim uyezd, Tobolsk province, where he founded a farmstead and was engaged in agriculture and sheep breeding.<sup>16</sup>

From the preserved official notes relating to the cattle farms of Ishim uyezd of that period we learn the following details:

The farmstead of Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev [is located] 15 kilometres from the volost village of Krasnoyarskaya and 50 k[ilometres] from the town of Petropavlovsk in the Akmola region. Land – 9600 hectares. Land – 9600 hectares. Land – 9600 hectares. Including: under the forest – 5000 hec[tares] and arable [land] – 600 hec[tares]. In 1912, 200 hec[tares] were sown, wheat yield – about 3.3 tons per hectare. The rest of the land is under pasture [for cattle] and hayfields.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1906, in an atmosphere of religious freedom unprecedented in Russia during the first revolution, the representative All-Russian Congress of the Russian Baptist Union in Rostov-on-Don, which gathered 107 delegates from 21 provinces, decided to establish its Siberian branch, with the centre in Omsk.<sup>18</sup> This decision was explained by the rapid growth in those years of the number of evangelical immigrants beyond the Urals. Mazaev took an active part in the

<sup>15</sup> Gosudarstvenny istoricheskiy arkhiv Omskoy oblasti [State Historical Archive of the Omsk region] (GIAOO), F. 67, op. 2, d. 2268, l. 2–5; *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 10 (1904), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Tsentral'ny gosudarstvenny arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan [Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan] (TsGA RK), F. 369, op. 1, d. 3929, l. 22; *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 10 (1904), p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Gosudarstvennoe byudzhethnoe uchrezhdenie Tyumenskoy oblasti 'Gosudarstvenny arkhiv v g. Tobol'ske' [State Budgetary Institution of the Tyumen Oblast 'State Archive in Tobolsk'], F. I-580, op. 1, d. 363, l. 223.

<sup>18</sup> *Protokol zasedaniy godovogo sobraniya predstaviteley obshchin russkikh evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov* [Minutes of Sessions of the Annual Meeting of Representatives of the Communities of Russian Evangelical Christian Baptists] (Rostov on Don: Tip. F. Pavlov, 1906), p. 4. See also *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 17 (1906), p. 32.

founding of the Siberian Department. In the minutes of the Omsk congress of Baptist congregations in July 1907, the Siberian Department was mentioned as a given: it had its own chairman (G. I. Mazaev), four board members (A. L. Evstratenko, A. H. Voropaev, A. A. Romanteev, I. V. Senichkin), and several evangelists.<sup>19</sup>

Among the decisions made at the Omsk congress in 1907, the most important were the following: to establish the Siberian branch of the Missionary Society of the Russian Baptist Union, which aimed to reach vast Russian territories beyond the Urals with evangelistic preaching, and to build a large (“union”) prayer house in Omsk. In fact, when the congress made these decisions, work was already underway in all these areas. The most gifted preachers were asked to engage in paid mission work with the obligation to travel for at least sixty days a year (“two-month missionaries”), at least four months (“half-year missionaries”), and seven months (“annual missionaries”).<sup>20</sup> The construction of the prayer house on the bank of the Om’ River began as early as the summer of 1905 but was especially active from the spring of 1907. The material costs of these projects were mostly borne by Mazaev.<sup>21</sup> His example encouraged other believers to give generously.

It seems astonishing, but nevertheless a fact, that the main work on the construction of the prayer house in Omsk, with a capacity of 1500 people, took only a little more than six months, and on 14 October 1907 it was inaugurated. The general enthusiasm of the Omsk Baptists on this occasion and the speed with which the work was carried out did not affect the quality: the house was solid and substantial, and it still serves as the main building of the Omsk Central Baptist Church. At the solemn service of consecration of the house of prayer, in front of many hundreds of listeners, G. I. Mazaev said, “From now on, we have a firm foot on the banks of the Irtysh and, like Yermak, we will begin the

---

<sup>19</sup> ‘Protokol s’ezda Sibirskogo otdela russkikh baptistov, iyul’ 1907, Omsk’ [Minutes of the Congress of the Siberian Division of Russian Baptists, July 1907, Omsk] *Baptist* (Rostov on Don), no. 4 (1907), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Proekt Ustava Missionskogo obshchestva russkikh evangel’skikh kbristian-baptistov* [Draft Charter of the Missionary Society of Russian Evangelical Baptist Christians] (Rostov on Don: Tip. F. Pavlov, 1906), pp. 8–9.

<sup>21</sup> T<sub>3</sub>GA RK, F. 369, op. 1, d. 3929, ll. 22–23.

secondary conquest of Siberia — of course, in religious terms.<sup>22</sup> These words were not without a prophetic spirit: up to the end of the 1920s, the Siberian Department (later also called the Siberian Union of Russian Baptists) grew and strengthened, spreading its influence to many towns and villages from the Ural Mountains to the Far East, reaching tens of thousands of people.<sup>23</sup> The January 1914 issue of the magazine *Gost'* published an article by G. I. Mazaev in which he addressed his Baptist readers with the significant words, 'We, your Siberian brethren, greet our brothers everywhere and anywhere [...] on behalf of the many who live between Chelyabinsk [...] and Vladivostok, on both sides of the Great Siberian Railway line.'<sup>24</sup>

Gavriil Ivanovich had an undoubted organisational talent and was able to rally around him a whole host of evangelists who 'awakened Siberia' and established hundreds of congregations in a short time. In different years, such well-known ministers in the Russian Baptist Union as A. L. Evstratenko, I. A. Romanteev, K. G. Gorbachev, A. M. Volgin, V. T. Popov, R. A. Fetler, A. S. Ananyin, F. G. Patkovsky, P. E. Evsyukov, F. E. Zabelin, T. V. Stelmakhov, G. S. Ostapets, N. E. Yakimenko, I. K. Kudel, and many others worked under Mazaev's leadership. They travelled from village to village by railway, steamships, horses, and on foot to preach, perform baptisms (often in winter in ice-holes), and participate in religious disputes ('debates about faith') both with Orthodox missionaries and — later — with atheists. The Russian magazine *Baptist*, usually reserved in its expression of feelings, described the spiritual labour of these people as follows: in order to better understand the reports coming from Siberia about the success of the mission, they had to be 'clothed in flesh and blood, watered with rain, dusted with dust in summer and Siberian blizzards in winter, covered

---

<sup>22</sup> *TsGA RK*, F. 64, op. 1, d. 3725, ll. 150-151 ob.; *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 3 (1908), pp. 22–23.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the statistics of the Siberian Baptist Union, see K. Prokhorov, *V sibirskikh palestinskikh. Istoria Omskoy tserkvi evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov (1890-e-1941)* [In the Siberian Palestines: History of the Evangelical Christians-Baptist Church in Omsk (1890s–1941)] (Samenkorn, 2019), pp. 435, 602–603.

<sup>24</sup> G. Mazaev, 'Zakon i blagodat' [The Law and Grace], *Gost'* [Guest] (St. Petersburg), 1 (1914), pp. 3–4.



with spring mud and an autumn season of bad roads, shaken over country roads and in the “Maxim Gorky” carriages of our railways’.<sup>25</sup>

In 1908–1909, Mazaev and his family, having handed over the farm to his manager, settled in Petropavlovsk, where he bought a house on Voznesensky Prospekt. His house, though comfortable, was rather modest for a millionaire, both on the outside and the inside. People who visited Mazaev’s house mentioned only a harmonium in terms of relatively expensive items.<sup>26</sup> Although the house was deemed to be two-storeyed, its lower floor, brick and solid, was underground, and only the wooden first floor was in plain sight.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Gavriil Ivanovich built an impressively sized steam mill in Petropavlovsk. It had three storeys and advanced foreign machinery and equipment for its time.<sup>28</sup> For his enterprise, Mazaev chose a place at the very end of Voznesensky Prospekt, behind the City Garden, not far from the Petropavlovsk railway station. He had a simple economic calculation, which fully justified itself. In the early twentieth century, a large number of migrants from the European part of Russia settled in the Akmola region, including in the Petropavlovsk district. These people were mainly engaged in farming; grain crops were constantly expanding, so the demand for grinding flour was great, and the mills brought good profits. At the same time, Gavriil Ivanovich built another house adjacent to the mill. It was a spacious wooden building, part of which was used for household purposes on weekdays. For a number of years, worship meetings of the Petropavlovsk community of Baptists were held there on Sundays in a hall separate from the living space.<sup>29</sup>

At the next convention of Siberian Baptist Christians in Omsk in 1909, V. G. Pavlov, F. P. Balikhin, and A. L. Evstratenko ordained G. I. Mazaev. Following that ordination, Mazaev was often called the

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘Yavny otvet ot Gospoda’ [A Clear Answer from the Lord] *Baptist*, 7–8 (1926), p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Oral Report by Petropavlovsk local historian V. N. Yavorskaya, a descendant of G. I. Mazaev (Petropavlovsk, 2020), State Archive of North Kazakhstan region, F. 55, op. 1, d. 350.

<sup>27</sup> Yavorskaya, Oral Report.

<sup>28</sup> Yavorskaya, Oral Report.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva’, p. 231. The Petropavlovsk Baptist church was founded by G. I. Mazaev in 1908.

‘Bishop of Siberia’, although he was actually only elevated to the rank of presbyter.<sup>30</sup> In 1909, the governor of Akmola region officially approved Gavriil Ivanovich as the spiritual leader of the Omsk Baptist community.<sup>31</sup> During this period, the priorities in Mazaev’s life shifted even more from economic affairs to spiritual matters. He spent much time on missionary and pastoral trips. Balanced and respectful to his opponents, Mazaev nevertheless firmly defended the principles of freedom of conscience — so natural and indisputable today but perceived somewhat differently in the Russian Empire and the USSR. When dealing with spiritual and disciplinary issues in congregations, Gavriil Ivanovich usually gave everyone who wished to speak a chance to do so, and only then spoke his mind. Although he was not an opponent of free discussion, contemporaries respectfully noted that ‘after his words, there was usually no more reasoning’.<sup>32</sup>

Some Orthodox clergymen, while officially regarding Mazaev as a ‘sectarian’ and ‘heretic’, treated him with respect in their personal interactions and left quite favourable recollections of him. For instance, one Orthodox missionary spoke of Gavriil Ivanovich’s good temper and mild Christian humour. In the spring of 1914, being in Petropavlovsk, this missionary visited Mazaev’s house, where they had an almost friendly conversation. At that time, one of Gavriil Ivanovich’s young workers (probably from the mill) was there, glumly waiting for his turn to speak to the master of the house. When the missionary, among other things, asked whether Mazaev shared the opinion of some of his brethren that all Baptists would be saved, Gavriil Ivanovich suddenly replied, ‘No, not all Baptists will be saved,’ and pointed with a smile to the worker who was waiting for him, ‘Well, take this one. I hired him but he duped me!’<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> V. Pavlov, ‘S’ezd v Omske’ [Congress in Omsk], *Baptist*, 4 (1910), p. 32. In March 1916, answering the questions of the Omsk police chief, Mazaev said, ‘I have never called myself “Bishop of Irkutsk, Yenisei, Tomsk, Tobolsk and Turgai region”, it is someone’s fiction.’ Rossiyskiy gosudarstvenny istoricheskiy arkhiv [Russian State Historical Archive] (RGIA), F. 821, op. 10, d. 595, l. 136.

<sup>31</sup> TsGA RK, F. 369, op. 1, d. 2845, ll. 17–17 ob.

<sup>32</sup> S. Fadyukhin, *Vospominaniya o perezhitom* [Memories about the Years Lived] (St. Petersburg: Bibliya dlya vsekh, 1993), p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Omskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 18 (1915), p. 16.

Striving to live according to the gospel, Gavriil Ivanovich always sought to align with the words of Scripture: ‘Give to him that asketh of thee’ (Matt 5:42); and the apostle’s command to do good with wisdom and knowledge (2 Pet 1:5). It is not always clear by appearance whether a person really is in great need. Mazaev was often approached by people who tried to deceive him. Therefore, according to some stories (perhaps semi-legendary), when he lived in Petropavlovsk, Gavriil Ivanovich usually carried his purse in one pocket of his coat and some money for donations and alms distribution in the other one. Small and large notes were mixed in the second pocket, and when Mazaev was asked for help, he — with a quiet prayer and without looking — would take out a note ‘from God’. They say he did it in this way so that he would not make a mistake concerning who needed more and who needed less. More than once, Mazaev, seeing a bitterly weeping person on the street or in the marketplace, approached the person and asked what had happened. Sometimes someone had been cheated or robbed, losing the last of their money. Here, the tears were real and the grief obvious. After hearing a simple story, Mazaev would discreetly give the poor person his helping hand with the words, ‘Jesus told me to give this to you.’ With these words, even people who were far from God often found a living faith.<sup>34</sup>

Among the testimonies of contemporaries about Gavriil Ivanovich, let us again draw attention to the reports of Orthodox clergymen:

Baptism in the Omsk diocese owes much of its growth, strong organisation, and the institution of numerous preachers to Mazaev [...] He donates annually to the work of preaching [...] thousands of roubles, and distributes bibles, gospels, and catechisms free of charge.<sup>35</sup>

Mazaev releases funds for the maintenance of preachers, conducts trials, performs the duties of a presbyter — baptising, marrying. [...] On his initiative congresses and solemn prayer meetings are appointed. [...] They decide on family matters, excommunications, admission to the congregation, election of new presbyters and preachers, and the granting of money and loans. The same congresses elect [...] deputies to the All-Russian Baptist

---

<sup>34</sup> Oral Report by presbyters V. N. Khotko and N. T. Murchich (Petropavlovsk, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> *Omskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, no. 19 (1910), p. 32.

conventions, which is held annually. [...] Baptist preachers, paid by the congregations and Mazaev, are no less than thirty.<sup>36</sup>

In such reports, there was sometimes an underlying thought that we too should preach and donate to the work of God with the same zeal! However, to Orthodox authors, Mazaev was, of course, still a ‘dangerous man’, even if he was a ‘good Samaritan’.

### The War and the Bolsheviks’ Rise to Power

In 1914, Mazaev strongly desired to move away from economic affairs altogether, ‘to sell off everything’ and devote the rest of his life exclusively to preaching the gospel. ‘I became very much weighed down by my position, literally to the point of illness,’ Gavriil Ivanovich wrote at the time, continuing, ‘The years are passing away, and the work entrusted to us by the Lord remains untouched.’<sup>37</sup> Who knows how Gavriil Ivanovich’s future life would have turned out if this, his sincere wish, had been fulfilled at that time.

With the outbreak of the First World War, religious freedom in the Russian Empire was largely restricted. Russian Baptists were perceived by many as foreign people, almost ‘enemies’, through the efforts of anti-sectarian propaganda. In September 1915, the St Petersburg newspaper *Zemshchina* published an article entitled ‘Wilhelm’s Workers in Siberia’, which drew public attention to the fact that Omsk was the centre of the Siberian Baptist Union, whose ‘spiritual leader’ Mr. Mazaev was expanding the scope of his dubious religious activities even in wartime.<sup>38</sup> The publication in *Zemshchina* served as a pretext for an investigation into the actions of Mazaev and some other ministers living in Western Siberia. As a result, the prayer house in Omsk was closed in April 1916 and then actually turned into a barracks for a military unit (this was the first seizure of the prayer house that Mazaev had helped finance). Such radical actions were accompanied by patriotic statements and were motivated by military needs. This state of affairs

<sup>36</sup> *Omskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, no. 9 (1910), pp. 14–15.

<sup>37</sup> G. Mazaev, ‘Vesti iz Sibiri’ [News from Siberia], *Gost’*, 7 (1914), p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Vil’gel’movy rabotniki v Sibiri’ [Wilhelm’s Workers in Siberia], *Zemshchina* (St. Petersburg), 11 September 1915.

continued for more than a year, and it was only after the February Revolution of 1917, when non-Orthodox religious communities in Russia regained their freedom, that the local authorities in Omsk stopped the criminal prosecution of Mazaev and returned the prayer house he had built to the local Baptists.<sup>39</sup>

Taking advantage of the favourable time, in the spring of 1917, Gavriil Ivanovich also initiated the founding of the Christian orphanage in Omsk, which by the autumn of the same year was built on the left bank of the Irtysh River. The Siberian Department of the Union of Russian Baptists ran the orphanage until 1920. During the First World War, the number of children who lost their parents increased significantly, and the need for the orphanage was great. The building, built with donations from believers, housed up to thirty-five children and five to seven attendants at a time. It is known that during the Civil War the orphanage received children from all parts of Siberia, and in 1920 it was transformed into a Soviet orphanage.<sup>40</sup>

During the reign of A. V. Kolchak, in February 1919, despite the official proclamation of freedom of religion in the ‘Great Siberia’, the Mazaev prayer house in Omsk was again taken away for the needs of the military. After requisitioning, it became the headquarters and barracks of the 3rd Steppe Siberian regular unit (regiment).<sup>41</sup> The Omsk believers then wrote complaints to Admiral Kolchak, involving even fellow believers in the United States in their litigation.<sup>42</sup> The assistance of the Western allies was vital for Kolchak, and apparently, this circumstance contributed to the fact that the prayer house, with official apologies, was returned to its rightful owners as early as June 1919.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Divine services in the Omsk prayer house resumed on 16 July 1917. See ‘V Omske’ [In Omsk], *Gost’*, 7 (1917), p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> *Gosudarstvenny muzey istorii religii* [State Museum of the History of Religion] (GMIR), F. 2, op. 16, d. 90, l. 6.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Iz Omskoy gorodskoy obshchiny’ [From the Omsk City Community], *Droog* [Friend] (Philadelphia), 8 (1919), p. 63; *Spravochnik i spisok abonentov telefonnoy seti g. Omska b Atamanskogo kbutora* [Directory and List of Subscribers of the Telephone Network of Omsk and Ataman Hamlet] (Omsk: F. G. Brekhov, 1919), p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Pis’mo propovednika Fetlera admiralu Kolchaku’ [Letter from Preacher Fetler to Admiral Kolchak], *Droog*, 10 (1919), p. 77.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Omskaya gorodskaya obshchina’ [Omsk City Community], *Blagovestnik* [Evangelist] (Omsk), 4 (1919), p. 45.

Under a different arrangement, in conditions of acute shortage of premises in the White Omsk, such a large building could well have gone to another regiment formed in the city or to one of the government institutions. The Christian press of the day reported on the occasion:

**Omsk City Community.** We have the joy to report that after a long wait, our prayer house was cleared of standing troops on 30 June this year. It took several days to clean the house, and on Sunday, 6 July, the first prayer meetings were held. Please pray for us that the Lord will bless all the labours in the field of God in Omsk.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the second requisition of the Mazaev prayer house in Omsk lasted a little over four months. Gavriil Ivanovich, with tears of joy, heartily greeted the believers in Omsk.

On the whole, until November 1919 with the fall of the Kolchak regime, Omsk Baptists did not experience significant restrictions in their religious life. Having received formal permission, they held congresses, preached, performed baptisms, travelled freely throughout Siberia, and published spiritual books, pamphlets, and their own magazine. In 1919, for example, the following were published: the Omsk hymn book *Voice of Faith* (564 pages, 5000 copies), the children's songbook *Hosanna* (100 hymns), *Memories* by G. I. Mazaev (with literary treatment by A. M. Volgin and A. S. Ananyin), the first five issues of the magazine *Evangelist* (edited by R. A. Fetler) and a number of Christian brochures, which were published by the Omsk publishing house Sower.<sup>45</sup>

The preface to Mazaev's memoirs contained the following words, very characteristic of him: 'I give the book *My Conversion and Memoirs* to the full ownership of the Baptist Orphanage in Novo-Omsk. The possible income from the publication should also go to the shelter treasury for the children. Gavriil Mazaev. Orphanage, 18 November 1919.'<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> *Blagovestnik* [Evangelist] (Omsk), no. 4 (1919), p. 45. See also, 'Letters from Siberia', *Droog*, no. 10 (1919), p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> GIAOO, F. 2603, op. 1, d. 65, l. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Obrashchenie na istinny put' i vospominaniya baptista G. I. M.* [Conversion to the True Path and Memoirs of Baptist G. I. M.] (Omsk: Publication of the Board of the Siberian Department of the Baptist Union, 1919), p. 1.

The end of 1919 saw the beginning of the most difficult period in Mazaev's life. The fact that Gavriil Ivanovich neither followed Kolchak eastwards nor left Russia obviously testifies to his inner readiness for the coming suffering and poverty. Like the biblical Job, Gavriil Ivanovich was deprived of all his property in a short period of time, while many of his relatives and friends died of illness or were subjected to repression by the Soviet authorities. However, Mazaev himself continued to travel, preaching the gospel from village to village from Omsk to Pavlodar and Slavgorod, was welcomed by the believers, instructed them in the faith, and built new communities in a great spiritual awakening in Siberia.<sup>47</sup> Thus Gavriil Ivanovich *freed himself* from the estate that was weighing him down (which he wrote about as early as 1914<sup>48</sup>). Without cursing the Soviet authorities, without grieving for his lost wealth, he finally gave himself fully to the main work of his life.

Of course, Mazaev remained too visible a figure for the authorities, and in 1926 he and his eldest son Timofey were arrested and placed in the prison in Petropavlovsk (Northern Kazakhstan).<sup>49</sup> Gavriil Ivanovich was then accused of counter-revolutionary activities. The Soviet magazine *Bezbozhnik u stanka* wrote in 1927, 'The leader of the Siberian Baptists, Mazaev, who owned large estates, called a Czech punitive squad during Kolchak's invasion and massacred the peasants because they, according to a decree of the Soviet authorities, were using his meadows and forests. Three peasants were flogged to death.'<sup>50</sup>

Gavriil Ivanovich, who had helped the poor all his life and shared his wealth with many people, had to listen to these unfair accusations. The following circumstances particularly prove that the criminal case against him was fabricated. If this grave offence took place in the second half of 1918, why was it only in 1926 that Mazaev was

<sup>47</sup> 'Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva', p. 240.

<sup>48</sup> 'Vestī iz Sibiri' [News from Siberia], *Gost'*, no. 7 (1914), pp. 182–183.

<sup>49</sup> *Dnevnik G. I. Mazaeva* [Diary of G. I. Mazaev (1926–1928)], *GMIR*, Coll. 1, op. 8, d. 77, ll. 1, 27.

<sup>50</sup> 'Baptist G. I. Mazaev s muzhikami raspravlyaetsya' [Baptist G. I. Mazaev is Punishing the Men], *Bezbozhnik u stanka* [Atheist at the Machine] (Moscow), 5 (1927), p. 18. On the numerous propaganda 'flogging trials' by kulaks of their labourers in the late 1920s, see, for example, *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i evangel'skie tserkvi Sibiri v 1920–1941 gg. Dokumenty i materialy* [The Soviet State and Evangelical Churches of Siberia in 1920–1941: Documents and Materials], compiled by A. I. Savin (Novosibirsk: Posokh, 2004), pp. 50–51.

charged? Sentenced to five years in prison and released for health reasons in 1928,<sup>51</sup> could he really have received such a lenient punishment from the Soviet authorities for the deaths of three poor peasants? By comparison, dozens of Baptists living in the areas between Petropavlovsk and Omsk had been shot for much lesser offences as early as 1920–1921.<sup>52</sup>

The reaction of local Baptist congregations to the accusation against Gavriil Ivanovich is also revealing. In 1917, his brother Dey Ivanovich, who had killed a robber in self-defence, was, despite his authority and high position in the leadership of the Baptist Union, suspended from ministry and even excommunicated for a period of time.<sup>53</sup> In the case of Gavriil Ivanovich, however, we see the exact opposite. Even the strictest congregations in Siberia, up to the day of his arrest and after his release, accepted him as a *man of God*, asked him for spiritual advice, and invited him to preach the Gospel among other things. In 1927, when Gavriil Ivanovich was already in prison, a general decision was made at the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Baptist community in Omsk that, as a sign of special respect for the prisoner, after his release from prison a small house should be built for him near the gates of the church he had once built on the bank of the Om' River.<sup>54</sup> Although Mazaev did not accept this gift, he was deeply touched by this manifestation of love and care on the part of his brothers and sisters.<sup>55</sup>

The chief of the prison in Petropavlovsk, where Mazaev was serving his sentence, was surprised at how many people visited the unusual prisoner and how many letters they wrote to him. At some point, this communist chief became so respectful and trusting of Gavriil Ivanovich that, for example, on Ivanovich's word of honour, he let him

---

<sup>51</sup> G. I. Mazaev served his sentence in Petropavlovsk from November 1926 to March 1928.

<sup>52</sup> Information from the archives of the Department of the Federal Security Service in Omsk Oblast. Baptists were then accused of secretly or explicitly supporting the kulak uprisings against the Soviet policy in villages. See Prokhorov, *V sibirskikh palestinakh*, pp. 458–459, 479–487.

<sup>53</sup> D. Mazaev, 'Nepriyatnoe ob'yasnenie' [Unpleasant Explanation], *Baptist*, 4 (1917), p. 64; D. Mazaev, 'Nepriyatnoe ob'yasnenie', *Slovo istiny* [Word of Truth] (Moscow), nos. 15–16 (1917), p. 229. See also, L. Kovalenko, *Oblako svitateley Khristovoykh* [Cloud of Witnesses of Christ] (Kiev: Tsentr Khristianskogo sotrudnichestva, 1997), p. 90.

<sup>54</sup> *GMIR*, Coll. 1, op. 8, d. 77, l. 74 ob.

<sup>55</sup> *GMIR*, Coll. 1, op. 8, d. 77, l. 74 ob.



out without an escort to go to the bazaar to buy paper. Going out into the city, the now aged prisoner met his relatives and friends, encouraged them — and, of course, in the process encouraged himself — willingly shared a meal with them, talked, prayed, and then bought the necessary amount of paper, which his friends evidently helped him carry. At the agreed-upon hour he returned to the prison. He made postal envelopes and bags for the local pharmacy with this paper.<sup>56</sup>

In May 1927, Gavriil Ivanovich wrote to N. V. Odintsov, chairman of the Federal Baptist Union in Moscow, ‘Thank God, I am well and healthy in body and soul. I am working, making envelopes, and have proved to be an exemplary craftsman [...] Our brothers visit me, bringing me good news, which cheers me up. The other day brother Semchenko reported about the conversion of six Kazakhs to the Lord.’<sup>57</sup>

After his release from prison in 1928, Mazaev did not stay free for long. According to the archive reference concerning the materials of the criminal case of 1932–1933, Gavriil Ivanovich, who was arrested in Alma-Ata, was accused of leading a counter-revolutionary organisation of Baptists over a vast territory. It was stated, ‘He travelled systematically to the Baptist communities of Kazakhstan, Siberia and Kirghizia [...] He created cells of the [counter-revolutionary] organisation and established communication with them.’<sup>58</sup> However, even in this case, we see that the punishment eventually imposed on Gavriil Ivanovich, which was five years in prison, immediately replaced by exile to the West Siberian region, was relatively mild given the gravity of the charges against him. This indirectly indicates that the judges themselves did not believe Mazaev’s actions were counter-revolutionary. Behind the words ‘created cells of a [counter-revolutionary] organisation’, there was undoubtedly the usual preaching and pastoral work.

In 1935, the Mazaev prayer house in Omsk was taken away from the believers for the third time. The premises remained under the

---

<sup>56</sup> *GMIR*, Coll. 1, op. 8, d. 77, l. 74 ob., pp. 26, 52.

<sup>57</sup> *GMIR*, Coll. 1, op. 8, d. 77-3, l. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Archival reference on the case materials of G. I. Mazaev, DKNB RK for East Kazakhstan region (14 March 2012).

jurisdiction of one of the police departments of Omsk until 1989.<sup>59</sup> There is little information about Mazaev's last arrest and his death. It was reported that Gavriil Ivanovich died in the Kustanay prison isolation ward at the end of 1937.<sup>60</sup> However, in 2012, our enquiry to the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan about the death of G. I. Mazaev (indicating that, according to unconfirmed data, he died in the Kustanay prison isolation ward in 1937) received an official reply from their Kustanay archival division that they have no information about G. I. Mazaev.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, Mazaev's death at the end of 1937 somewhere in the depths of the Gulag seems the most probable, as no one else saw him thereafter among the living. . .

---

<sup>59</sup> In 1989–1990, the house was returned to Omsk Baptists. After the restoration of the building, its second grand opening and consecration took place on 12 January 1992.

<sup>60</sup> 'Vospominaniya Gavriila Ivanovicha Mazaeva', afterword, 1. 129; N. Khrapov, *Sebast'e poteryannoy zhizni* [The Happiness of a Lost Life], 3 vols. (Moscow: Protestant, 1991), 3, p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Response from the Archives of the Department of the Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Records of the General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Kostanay region, 20 September 2012; Archives of the Central Baptist Church of Omsk.