

The Prayer House of Omsk Baptists in 1919

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This article describes an episode from the history of the civil war in Siberia in 1919. The Central Baptist prayer house in Omsk was requisitioned by troops of Admiral Kolchak, the commander of anti-Bolshevik forces in Siberia, and for several months was used as a military headquarters and barracks for soldiers. The release of the prayer house from the military post was made possible due to the assistance of the world-wide fellowship of Baptists. Famous brothers William and Robert Fetler took an active part in these events.

Keywords

Siberia; Omsk; prayer house; Siberian Baptist Union; civil war; A.V. Kolchak government

Background to the Building of Omsk Prayer House

In 1905–1907, Baptists in Omsk, Siberia, built a large chapel, or in the language of Slavic evangelicals ‘prayer house’, on Myasnitskaya Street in the city during the period of the first Russian Revolution. It was in that period that Russian ‘sectarians’ — as Baptists and other non-Orthodox believers were usually termed — first gained freedom of religion in Russia. In 1906–1907, the Siberian Baptist Union was also formed, with its centre in Omsk. And the new prayer house, which could seat up to 1,500 people, became the main church building among the Russian Baptists throughout Siberia.

There are some details about the Omsk prayer house in the travel notes of Demyty Aleksandrov, the evangelist of the All-Russian Union of Russian Baptists. He visited Western Siberia in the autumn of 1907. The construction was actually completed in Alexandrov’s presence. Here is what he then noted in his diary:

This house is built of brick: length – 25 metres, width – 18 metres, the height of the walls inside the house – 6,5 metres, and outside – 9,6 metres. It has a gallery with a capacity of up to 700 people; two pulpits, one of which is small and the other is 2,5 metres high above the deliberation room.¹

¹ *Otchet baptistskogo missionerskogo obshchestva za 1907–1908 gg.* [Report of the Baptist Missionary Society for 1907–1908] (Odessa, 1909), pp. 25–26.

The necessary funds for the construction were given by Gavriil Ivanovich Mazaev, the chairman of the Siberian Baptist Union, a very wealthy man who was involved in cattle breeding and fine-fleeced sheep in Siberia. Interestingly, although Mazaev was able to finance all the construction work alone, he reportedly ‘did not want to deprive other members of the community of the blessings of God’.² There was blessing in giving. As a result, the Omsk believers made the decision that Mazaev would initially pay all the necessary amount — which at the end of 1907 was about twenty-nine thousand rubles³ — and then gradually, over the course of several years, half of these funds, as a result of general donations, were planned to return to Mazaev.⁴ However, in practice, the return of the money was severely delayed, and was still being discussed at the congress in Omsk in 1919.⁵

A photograph has been preserved which was taken on 14 October 1907 during the grand opening of the prayer house in Omsk. It shows both the pulpits and a part of the gallery (balconies), which then adjoined all four walls of the building, thus it was very spacious. The general enthusiasm of the Omsk Baptists and the speed of construction work (the main work was carried out in the summer of 1907) did not affect the quality: the house turned out to be a very solid structure, and it still serves as the main building of the Omsk Baptist Church.

During the solemn service, or consecration, at the opening of the prayer house and in the presence of many people Mazaev made the following comment: ‘From now on, we have placed our feet firmly on the banks of the Irtysh River and, like Yermak, we will begin the second conquest of Siberia — of course, religiously.’⁶ The reference was to Yermak Timofeyevich, who, in the sixteenth century, led the conquest of Siberia for the Tsar. Mazaev’s words were not without a prophetic spirit: up to the end of the 1920s, the Siberian Union of Russian Baptists grew and strengthened, spreading its influence to cities and villages from the Ural Mountains to the Far East, and encompassed tens of thousands of people.⁷

² See: K. Prokhorov, *V sibirskikh palestinakh. Istoriya Omskoy tserkvi evangel’skikh khristian-baptistov (1890s – 1941)* [In the Siberian Palestines. History of the Omsk Church of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (1890s – 1941)] (Omsk – Steinhagen: Samenkom, 2019), p. 130.

³ *Otchet baptistskogo missionerskogo obshchestva za 1907–1908 gg.*, p. 26.

⁴ *Pervy svobodny s’ezd Sibirskogo otdela Soyuzo russkikh baptistov v Omske* [The First Free Congress of the Siberian Department of the Union of Russian Baptists in Omsk] (Omsk, 1918), p. 46.

⁵ *Blagovestnik* [Evangelist] (Omsk), 4 (1919), p. 40.

⁶ *Omskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti* [Omsk Diocesan Gazette], 3 (1908), pp. 22–23.

⁷ *Blagovestnik*, 4 (1919), p. 41.

During the Civil War

Over the years of the existence of the Omsk Baptist community, the authorities have seized its prayer house three times: during World War I (April 1916–June 1917); during the Civil war in Siberia (February–June 1919); under the Soviet rule (1935–1991). This article focuses on the second requisition of the house of worship, which took place in 1919.

In the winter of 1918–1919, Omsk was flooded with refugees from Bolshevik Russia. The city was so crowded with visitors that it was almost impossible to rent any room in it. Few people paid attention to those who arrived — even if the arrivals were well-known and eminent. Together with refugees, many evangelical believers found their way to Omsk. It is interesting to note that even some English soldiers — from among those who arrived in Omsk in October 1918 to help the Siberian government in the fight against the Bolsheviks⁸ — were evangelical believers and soon began to attend the Baptist Sunday services in the Omsk prayer house.⁹ The local community warmly welcomed these soldiers, talked willingly with them through an interpreter (the famous Baptist minister Robert Fetler, who then lived in Omsk, was able to interpret) and spoke of them in such terms as ‘they are our brothers from Britain’, and ‘dear guests’.¹⁰

During this period, Omsk was also the centre for the formation of many military units, premises for which, according to the laws of the war, were requisitioned. And so, on 21 February 1919, the prayer house of Omsk Baptists on Myasnitskaya Street was occupied and became the headquarters and barracks of the 3rd Steppe Siberian Regular Regiment.¹¹ Initially, the military behaved kindly and even allowed the believers to conduct services one day a week (Sundays) in the part of the house they were not using. However, already by March 1919, the Baptists were denied this. As in the period of the previous requisition of the building (in 1916–1917), they had to divide into groups and gather for prayer in private houses.¹²

⁸ ‘Vstrecha angliyskikh voysk’ [Reception of the British Troops], *Sibirskiy Vestnik* (Omsk), 27 October 1918. See also: D. Ward, *Soyuznaya interventsia v Sibiri 1918 – 1919 gg* (Moscow: State Publishing House, 1923), p. 65.

⁹ *Blagovestnik*, 1 (1919), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; *Droog* [Friend] (Issue of the Russian Missionary Society in Philadelphia, USA), 8 (1919), p. 63.

¹¹ *Blagovestnik*, 1 (1919), p. 6; *Spravochnik i spisok abonentov telefonnoy seti Omska i Atamanskogo khutora* [Directory and List of Telephone Network Subscribers of Omsk and Ataman Village] (Omsk: F.G. Brekhov, 1919), p. 17. See also: A. Rakova, *Omsk – stolitsa beloy Rossii* (Omsk: [n. pub.], 2010), p. 68.

¹² *Blagovestnik*, 1 (1919), p. 6; The famous Omsk writer A.S. Sorokin then wrote, ‘Why is the Baptist house closed? There is a military barrack there...’ (Historical Archive of the Omsk Region, F. 1073, op. 1, d. 547, l. 47.)





Previous page, top: Omsk prayer house in the 1920s

from the archive of Omsk Baptist Church

Previous page, bottom: consecration of the prayer house on 14 October 1907

from the State Museum of the History of Religion, St. Petersburg

This page, left: Admiral Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak (1874–1920)

public domain

This page, top right: William Fetler (1883–1957)

from the archive of the Union of Evangelical-Christian Baptists, Moscow

This page, bottom right: Robert Fetler (1892–1941)

from the archive of the Union of Evangelical-Christian Baptists, Moscow

Believers Defending Their House of Worship

The board of the Siberian Baptist Union petitioned the authorities to release the prayer house from the military, but were unsuccessful.¹³ Then the Omsk believers, having heard about the significant material, technical and military assistance provided by the Western powers to the Kolchak government, decided to act differently. Here the key figures were two brothers, Robert and William Fetler. Both had studied in London at Spurgeon's College, and were aware of international Baptist links. Robert Fetler, who had settled in Siberia, wrote a letter to his brother William (in Russian, Vasily Andreevich), who was living in the United States at the time, and informed him of the requisition of the main prayer house in Omsk and of the negative consequences of this event for the entire Siberian Baptist Union.¹⁴ Robert Fetler apparently asked William to organise a collection of signatures among influential American Baptists and to send a collective message to Admiral Kolchak in Omsk, who had proclaimed himself 'Supreme Ruler'. The petition from across the ocean, according to the design of Robert Fetler, was intended to carry more weight than the petitions of the Omsk believers.¹⁵

William Fetler, after receiving the alarming news from Omsk, decided to act immediately. Correspondence across the ocean took quite a while, and he recognised that collecting signatures in America would also take time. However, in the view of the Fetler brothers the matter was urgent, and William sent a personal message to Admiral Kolchak in late April 1919. Although this was written by William Fetler himself, it is significant that he used the pronoun 'we'. This could refer to the American people as a whole or to an international Baptist community. For the sake of the benefit of the case, William signed this message with his most impressive titles, which he had at that time: Director General of the Russian Missionary and Educational Society in America; the editor of the journal *Friend of Russia (Philadelphia)*.¹⁶

The message of the letter was clear. However, it diplomatically avoided a harsh accusatory tone and offered a way forward for the other party. Fetler used the argument of religious freedom, obviously assuming that Kolchak's administration would prefer to take a different approach towards religious minorities than that of the 'old' tsarist government. It is also possible, reading between the lines rather than from explicit statement, that Fetler sensed that Kolchak could benefit from the support of as wide a spectrum of the population as possible, Baptists included. Religious freedom

¹³ *Blagovestnik*, 1 (1919), p. 6; no. 4 (1919), p. 40; *The Missionary Review of the World*, September 1919, p. 712.

¹⁴ *Droog*, 4 (1919), p. 30; no. 8 (1919), p. 63; Prokhorov, *V sibirskikh palestinakh*, p. 417.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Droog*, 10 (1919), p. 77.

was a crucial topic for Slavic Baptists, and now it was brought into discussion in a changing political situation. Here is the text of this interesting document:

30 April 1919

Gracious Sovereign, Citizen Admiral Kolchak!

I'm sorry to trouble you. Here, in the United States, it is reported that a Baptist prayer house was closed in Omsk, turning it into a club for soldiers or officers.

In America, a country of complete religious tolerance, this is incomprehensible, and such persecution for faith is strange in a country ruled by the humane and liberated people's rulers.

But maybe we are misinformed. For this reason, I appeal to you, as the head of the Siberian Government, with a humble request to explain to us this case of persecution for faith, if it occurred, and also to inform whether you intend to hinder the practice of faith at all, as under the old government, or we can hope for the complete freedom of religion in Russia.

For many important reasons, we are very interested to know this.

With deep respect,

Vasily Andreevich Fetler.¹⁷

The mention of the 'club for soldiers or officers' in this letter is an echo of the very first reports of events in Omsk, when the purpose of the requisition of the building was still not completely clear to the believers. The same phrase, as well as the characteristic reservations ('maybe we are misinformed', 'persecution for faith, if it occurred') indicate William Fetler's rapid response to the request for help when it was not yet possible to find out all the details. The tone of William's letter is also noteworthy. In it one feels not so much the conviction or accusation of Kolchak, but a Christian exhortation, which it was hoped would prompt the admiral to rectify the situation. And to do this without damaging anyone's reputation. Fetler's desire to draw the attention of the 'Supreme Ruler' not only to the particular situation with the Baptist prayer house, but also to the general state of affairs with regard to religious freedom in the territory under his control, is also noteworthy.

The message of William Fetler was not left unanswered. The office of Admiral Kolchak reacted to it in a most serious way. Here is the full text of the official letter received by William from Omsk in the summer of that year.

¹⁷ Ibid.

ADMINISTRATIVE DEPARTMENT
OF THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT

Director of Chancellery of
THE SUPREME RULER

15 July¹⁸1919

No. 3670

The city of Omsk

To Vasily Andreyevich Fetler, General Director of
the Russian Missionary and General Education
Society in America, the editor of the journal
“Friend of Russia”, Philadelphia.

As a result of your letter of 30 April, this year, the General Directorate for Religious Affairs was requested, and reported the following: in its activities, both in relation to the Orthodox Church, and in relation to heterodox and other religions, the General Directorate proceeds entirely from the principles of law-based state. It invariably strives for the consistent implementation of the principles of religious freedom and autonomy of religious societies, limited only by the requirements of State laws, and is guided by the laws of 17 April 1905 and 14 July 1917¹⁹ on freedom of conscience. In particular, it also considers it its duty to protect the unhindered exercise of the legal right of permitted sects to freely perform their divine services.

In view of this, immediately after receiving the information about the occupation of the Baptist prayer house by the quartering of soldiers, the General Directorate immediately began investigating the case on the spot and entered into a relationship with the War Ministry on the release of this building. The War Department, completely agreeing with the fundamental point of view on the religious policy of the General Directorate and, in particular, on this issue, from its part ordered the release of the Baptist prayer house. This order was not, however, executed for some time, apparently due to the impossibility of

¹⁸ This letter should probably be dated 15 June, not 15 July, because it is known that the prayer house in Omsk had already been returned to the believers on 30 June 1919.

¹⁹ These laws, adopted in the era of revolutions, guaranteed freedom of conscience and religious convictions to all citizens of Russia. See: *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiyskoy imperii* [The Complete collection of laws of the Russian Empire] (SPb., 1908). Vol. XXV, S. 257; *Vestnik Vremennogo pravitel'stva* [The Bulletin of the Provisional Government], 1917, 20 July.

immediately placing the soldiers in other premises. The War Ministry specifically stated that the impossibility of immediately releasing the Baptist prayer house was due solely to Omsk being overcrowded now, and so the building will be vacated immediately after the leaving of the regiment that occupies the building and that it will take no more than 10 days to complete this task.

The General Directorate considers this as a single fact, caused by random circumstances, and in no way arising from the principles of the State religious policy and which in no case can be a precedent.

I have the honor to inform you of the above on the issue you have raised about the freedom of conscience in Russia.

Director (ad interim) of the Office of the Supreme Ruler
Major General Martyanov,
Head of Department
Tishcheev.²⁰

This historical document quite definitely testifies to those moral and political priorities, which the Kolchak government followed. Of course, the very fact of requisitioning the prayer house and the placement of a headquarters and barracks in it does not adorn the Kolchak War Ministry with glory.²¹ It is unlikely that the White Russian Army officers would have done this with the Orthodox church, and therefore a discrimination against the ‘heterodox’ believers, of course took place here. At the same time, the legal assessment of the situation and the reaction to it of the General Directorate for Religious Affairs²² under the Ministry of the Interior is significant. It is also very important that in replying to William Fetler, General Alexander Martyanov, who was one of Kolchak’s most trusted representatives,²³ was not only polite and courteous, but his words were reinforced by deeds: on 30 June 1919, the Omsk Baptists received back their prayer house. In the conditions of war and an acute shortage of premises in the city, this building could probably have been transferred to another army unit or government organisation.

The Omsk believers responded with great joy! Below is a note which was published immediately in two Russian evangelical magazines, in the second half of 1919:

Omsk City Community. We are pleased to announce that, after a long wait, on 30 June of this year our prayer house was released from the troops. It took several days to clean the house, and on Sunday, 6 July, the first prayer meetings took place. We ask you to pray for us so that the Lord blesses all works in the field of God in Omsk.²⁴

²⁰ *Droog*, 10 (1919), p. 77.

²¹ At that time the Minister of War was General N.A. Stepanov.

²² At that time the head of the Department for Religious Affairs was I.A. Tikhonravov.

²³ See, for instance, I. Kuptsov, A. Buyakov and V. Yushko, *Bely generalitet na Vostoke Rossii v gody Grazhdanskoy voyny. Biografichesky spravochnik* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2011), pp. 333–334.

²⁴ *Blagovestnik*, 4 (1919), p. 45; *Droog*, 10 (1919), p. 77.

Thus, the second requisition of the prayer house of the Omsk Baptists, although described as ‘long’, lasted a little more than four months. Unlike after the previous requisition, this time the building did not require significant repairs. A simple ‘house cleaning’ was enough. Probably, the Kolchak military had some kind of instructions that ordered them to be careful with requisitioned property.

In general, until November 1919 (the fall of the regime of A.V. Kolchak), the Omsk Baptists did not experience significant restrictions in their religious life. With formal permission, they held congresses, preached, performed baptisms, moved freely around Siberia, and published spiritual books, brochures, and their own magazine.²⁵ Severe restrictions were to follow. However, the episode in 1919 is an indication of what the worldwide fellowship of Baptists, across national boundaries, can sometimes achieve.

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²⁵ See more details in Prokhorov, *V sibirskikh palestinakh*, pp. 422–425.