

[January 2009] History of the Jews of Serbia and Montenegro see: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/serbia.html>

[Synagogues Without Jews](#) [February 2009]

"There were some Jews in Pannonia in Roman times. Jews seem to have reached Belgrade and there were also traces of a Jewish population along the banks of the Danube during the tenth century. Some Jews penetrated into Serbia from Macedonia. During the ninth and tenth centuries many of the Serbians converted to Christianity. The faith of the new Christians at that time was an amalgamation of Christianity, Judaism, and paganism. Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th-century traveler, also mentions the influence of the Jews on the inhabitants of the Balkans. At the time of the conquest of Serbia by Sultan Murad in 1389, the Jews engaged in the sale of salt. Under Turkish rule the Jews of Belgrade played an important part in the trade between northern and southern Turkish provinces which passed through Belgrade. During the period of the Austrian rule over northern Serbia from 1718 to 1739, the government's attitude toward the Jews was generally good. During the Serbian wars of independence (1804-30), some of the Jews fled from Belgrade and in 1807 founded a community, which numbered 280 persons in Zemun. The Jews supplied arms to the revolutionary army. However, the independence movement, which fomented rebellions against the Turks from time to time, frequently attacked the Jews. In 1831 the Serbian government decreed certain limitations on the crafts in which the Jews were engaged. In 1845 they were excluded from tailoring and shoemaking. During the reign of Milosh Obrenovich, the prince of Serbia, there was a favorable change in the condition of the Jews. However, with the ascent of the Karageorgevich dynasty in 1842, which supported the interests of the Serbian merchants who envied their Jewish rivals, the condition of the Jews took a turn for the worse. A decree of 1856 forbade the Jews to reside in the provincial towns. There were then 2,000 Jews in Serbia. About 1,000 of them settled in Belgrade, while the rest were dispersed in other towns. When Prince Milosh returned to power in 1858, the condition of the Jews temporarily improved. However, during the reign of his son, Prince Michael (1860-1868), who was

also influenced by the Serbian merchants, the persecutions were renewed. An expulsion decree of 1861 against 60 Jewish families of Aabac was changed during the same year into another decree which authorized the Jews-and this only in their places of residence-to practice the same professions as they had engaged in before February 28, 1861. The Jewish merchants, also in their places of residence, were authorized to trade in raw materials and foodstuffs. These rights, however, could not be transferred to their successors. Concerning real estate, the new decree confirmed a former one which prohibited the purchase of property in the provincial towns. After the assassination of Michael and the enthronement of Milan Obrenovich, the Serbian parliament voted the emancipation of all citizens, but at the same time confirmed the restrictive decrees of 1856 and 1861. In 1873 the Jews were expelled from the towns of Aabac, Smederevo, and Poyarevac. The treaty of Berlin of 1878 accorded civil and political equality to the Jews of Serbia, but it was only in 1889 that the Serbian parliament proclaimed the complete equality of all Serbians without distinction of origin and religion and abolished the restrictive decrees of the previous years. In 1895 there were 5,102 Jews in Serbia, 5,729 in 1900, and 5,000 in 1912. The number of Jews who participated in the Balkan Wars (1912-13) was 500. During the Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1913 and World War I many Jews were decorated." [Source](#) . [February 2009]

[January 2009] Serbia, including the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, was the former Yugoslavia's largest republic. An independent kingdom until conquered by the Turks in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina was from the late 18th century until 1918 mostly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a center of Jewish culture. The Jewish population in what is current Serbia increased greatly following the expulsions of Jews from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s because Sephardi Jews settled in areas of the Ottoman empire. Often these merchants and traders found an atmosphere relatively free from violent persecution or governmental interference. Vojvodina, the northern part of Serbia, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for many years. By far the majority of Jews outside Belgrade were in Vojvodina, where numerous cemeteries and/or synagogues existed before WWII. Most remaining synagogue buildings are protected monuments, some being (slowly) restored or under adaptive reuse, usually incorporating visible reminders of Jewish origins. Of the many Jewish cemeteries still extant in Serbia, most are in poor condition. Besides Belgrade and Zemun, Jewish communities survive in Novi Sad, Niš, Subotica and Zrenjanin. When the nation of Yugoslavia was created following WWI, Serbian Jews lived in a loose federation of previously separate states. Each state had its own Jewish populations, organisations and customs until the German invasion and occupation of Serbia in April 1941. German support for the ultra-nationalist serb Chetniks saw persecution and murder:

1. April to August 1941: a legal campaign restricting Jews' freedoms
2. August to December 1941: uprising of the Serbs against the Germans led to brutal crackdowns against all Serbs, including Jews, with imprisonment or murder
3. December 1941 to May 1942: concentration of surviving Jews (7,500 to 8,000 people) in the Sajmište concentration camp.
4. March to May 1942: All Jews were killed, mostly gassed. Belgrade was the first city in Europe officially declared *Judenrein*. A number of Yugoslav Jews who evaded the round-ups and camps became partisans.

Post-Second World War communist Yugoslavia (six federated republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro under Marshal Josip Broz Tito): Jewish life began to return to the Balkans. With approximately 14,500 out of a pre-war population of 16,000 Serbian Jews killed, from 1948 many of those survivors migrated to Israel. Abandoned and ruined synagogues and cemeteries: Former synagogues gradually were either demolished or had new uses. Many cemeteries were abandoned with some pillaged and gravestones used for construction. Others became overgrown and almost forgotten.

The Jewish community (about 6,000 people throughout the former Yugoslavia) was recognised as both an ethnic and a religious community. Communist Yugoslavia was not a part of the Soviet bloc so local Jews were not persecuted or isolated. They further assimilated into society and lost contact with religious life. There was only one rabbi in the country. The Federation of Yugoslav Jewish Communities cared for Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and other infrastructure where communities no longer exist. Some cemeteries were moved. Some were maintained. The Jewish community also erected close to thirty memorials within former Yugoslavia to commemorate Jews lost during the war. Throughout the 1980s, wide-ranging programs run by the Federation and individual Jewish communities were helped by international Jewish philanthropy.

This began with the secession of Slovenia, and then of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1991. A series of bloody Balkan wars tore apart the country, left hundreds of thousands of dead and millions displaced, and destroyed thousands of religious, cultural and historic heritage sites. The state's collapse made the continuation of Jewish institutions particularly difficult, even without the trauma of war and the Jewish emigration that resulted. Gradually the small Jewish communities of the former Yugoslavia have recreated themselves as more locally-based organisations, gradually rebuilt earlier connections, and expanded their association with Jewish communities and institutions in Israel and throughout Europe.

The country's 2002 census reported officially 785 Jews in Serbia, with 91% in Belgrade and 40% of all Serbian Jews in Vojvodina. By estimate, however, about 2,200 Jews live in Belgrade. The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provides material aid to the community.

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