

## = The Holocaust in Albania =

The Holocaust in Albania consisted of murders , deportations and crimes against humanity committed against Jews , Slavs , Roma and other minorities in Greater Albania by German , Italian and Albanian collaborationist forces while the country was under Italian and German occupation during the Second World War . Throughout the war , nearly 2 @, @ 000 Jews sought refuge in Albania @- @ proper . Most of these Jewish refugees were treated well by the local Albanian population , despite the fact that the country was occupied first by Fascist Italy , and then by Nazi Germany . Albanians , following a traditional custom of hospitality known as besa , often sheltered Jewish refugees in mountain villages , and transported them to Adriatic ports from where they fled to Italy . Other Jews joined resistance movements throughout the country .

For the 500 Jews who lived in Albanian @- @ dominated Kosovo , the experience was starkly different and many did not survive the war . With the surrender of Italy in September 1943 , German forces occupied Albania , Kosovo and other territories that had been annexed to the country . In 1944 , an Albanian Waffen @- @ SS division was formed , which arrested and handed over to the Germans a further 281 Jews from Kosovo who were subsequently deported to the Bergen @- @ Belsen concentration camp , where many were killed . In late 1944 , German forces were driven out of Albania @- @ proper and Communists led by Enver Hoxha came to power in the country . At the same time , Axis forces in the Albanian @- @ annexed regions of Kosovo and western Macedonia were defeated by the Yugoslav Partisans , who subsequently re @- @ incorporated these areas into the newly Communist Federal People 's Republic of Yugoslavia .

Approximately 600 Jews were killed in Albania @- @ proper , and Albanian @- @ annexed Kosovo and western Macedonia during the war . As up to 1 @, @ 800 Jews were living in Albania @- @ proper at the end of the war , it is estimated that the country emerged from the Second World War with a population of Jews eleven times greater than at the beginning . Most of these subsequently emigrated to Israel , but several hundred remained until the fall of Communism in the early 1990s before they did the same . In 1995 , the Republic of Albania was declared Righteous Among the Nations for the role that dozens of Albanian families played in saving Jewish refugees in the country during the Second World War . As of 2011 , 69 Albanians have been recognized as Righteous Among the Nations .

## = = Background = =

According to the census of 1930 , 24 Jews lived in Albania . In 1937 , the Jewish community , which then numbered nearly 300 , was granted official recognition in the country . With the rise of Nazism , a number of German and Austrian Jews took refuge in Albania , and the Albanian embassy in Berlin continued to issue visas to Jews until the end of 1938 , at a time when no other European country was willing to do so . Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War , most Albanians had never had contact with Jews because of the small number of them in the country . As a result , antisemitism was less widespread in Albania than in other countries . Before the war , most Albanian Jews lived in the town of Korçë , in the southeastern part of the country . The Jewish community in Kosovo , part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia , numbered approximately 500 .

The least developed country in Europe , Albania was subjected to Italian economic and political influence throughout the 1930s . On 25 March 1939 , Italian dictator Benito Mussolini gave Albanian King Zog I an ultimatum demanding the acceptance of an Italian military protectorate over Albania . When Zog refused to accept , the Italians invaded on 7 April 1939 , and deposed him . Afterwards , they re @- @ established the Albanian state as a protectorate of the Kingdom of Italy , then installed a quisling regime headed by the biggest landowner in the country , Shefqet Vërlaci . An Albanian " national assembly " was established , which quickly voted for the full economic and political union of Albania with the Kingdom of Italy , led by Italian King Victor Emmanuel III . Under the direction of viceroy general Francesco Jacomoni , the Italian administration implemented laws that prohibited Jewish immigration to Albania and mandated the deportation of all foreign Jews in the country .

Within a month of the Italian occupation , the Albanian Fascist Party ( Albanian : Partia Fashiste e

Shqipërisë , or PFSH ) was formed . It enacted laws that prevented Jews from joining it and excluded them from professions such as education . Composed of ethnic Albanians and Italians residing in Albania , the party existed as a branch of the Italian Fascist Party ( Italian : Partito Nazionale Fascista , or PNF ) and its members were required to swear an oath of loyalty to Mussolini . All Albanians serving the Italian occupiers were required to join , and it became the only legal political party in the country .

As the war progressed , Italy transformed the Albanian Kingdom into Greater Albania , a protectorate of Italy that included most of Kosovo and a portion of western Macedonia which was detached from Yugoslavia after the Axis powers invaded in 1941 . Kosovo Albanians enthusiastically welcomed the Italian occupation . Although officially under Italian rule , the Albanians in Kosovo controlled the region and were encouraged to open Albanian schools , which had been prohibited under Yugoslav rule . They were also given Albanian citizenship by Italian authorities and allowed to fly the Albanian flag . Nevertheless , the Italians kept hundreds of thousands of troops in Albania and surrounding areas . Yugoslav sources indicated that there were approximately 20 @, @ 000 Italian soldiers and 5 @, @ 000 Italian police and frontier guards in Kosovo , and 12 @, @ 000 soldiers and 5 @, @ 000 police and border guards in the Albanian @-@ annexed portion of Macedonia . At the same time , Italian military authorities warned that at least ten hostages would be shot for every Italian soldier killed or wounded in these regions .

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After the invasion of Yugoslavia , the Jewish community in Albania grew as Jews from Macedonia and northern Serbia , as well as Jewish refugees from Germany , Austria and Poland , came to Italian @-@ controlled , Albanian @-@ annexed Kosovo and settled in the towns of Pristina , Prizren and Uro?evac . As many as 1 @, @ 000 refugees arrived , attributed by German sources to a Jewish organization which was responsible for smuggling Jews into the country . The refugees did not experience persecution to the level that Jews were experiencing in German @-@ controlled territories , because the Italians considered them to be of economic importance and " representative of Italian interests abroad " . However , the Italians did arrest approximately 150 Jewish refugees and transferred them to the town of Berat in Albania , where they were given a chance to work to earn money . Also arrested were 192 Jews from the Italian @-@ annexed Bay of Kotor who were transferred to Nazi concentration camps in Albania on 27 or 28 July 1941 , before being transferred to camps located within Italy . As many as 2 @, @ 000 Jews sought refuge in Albania during the war .

The local population of Albania was very protective of the Jewish refugees . Many were transported to Albanian ports on the Adriatic from where they could travel to Italy . Other Jews hid in remote mountain villages , while some joined resistance movements across the country . The Albanian treatment of Jews was in accordance with traditional Albanian customs of hospitality and besa ( " word of honour " ) . Despite this , instances of cruelty towards Jews did occur in Albania during the war , and on several occasions Jews being smuggled into the country were killed by Albanians who seized their jewellery and money .

In January 1942 , the Germans estimated at the Wannsee Conference that Albania was inhabited by 200 Jews . That same month , Jews were interned by the Italians at a camp in the town of Pristina . Although they feared that they would be handed over to the Germans , the Italian commander of the camp promised them that this would never happen . However , on 14 March the Italians blockaded the camp and arrested the Jews who had been detained there . Some were then handed over to German forces and transported to the Sajmi?te concentration camp near Belgrade , where they were killed . Others , together with Serbs , were taken to the camp in Berat , where they remained until Italy 's capitulation . It is estimated that as many as 500 Jews were interned in the camps in Berat , Krujë and Kavajë during the Italian occupation .

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When Italy surrendered to the Allies in September 1943 , all concentration camps in Albania were dissolved . Shortly after , the Germans invaded and occupied Albania , and most Italian soldiers in the country surrendered to the Germans . German forces then began to target for extermination all Jews living in Albania and the Albanian @-@ dominated regions of occupied Yugoslavia . The Jewish community in western Macedonia , which had remained untouched under Italian occupation , was targeted and several groups of Jews were dispatched to extermination camps . Their property and belongings were later taken by many organizations , institutions and private individuals .

The Germans arranged for Albania 's administration to be reorganized shortly after occupying the country . On 15 September , the Albanian National Committee was established under German sponsorship . It governed until a Regency Council was established and recognized by Germany as the official government of the country on 3 November 1943 . Xhafer Deva , a Kosovo Albanian ally of the Germans in the region , was then appointed the Minister of Interior of Albania . Deva later founded the Nazi @-@ aligned Second League of Prizren in Kosovo , which declared jihad ( holy war ) against Slavs , Gypsies and Jews and sought to create an ethnically cleansed Greater Albania . The League had the backing of Haj Amin al @-@ Husseini , the Mufti of Jerusalem . A leading supporter of the Nazis , he pressed for the implementation of the Final Solution . With a new administration in place , the Germans demanded that Albanian authorities provide them with lists of Jews to be deported . However , local authorities did not comply and even provided Jewish families with forged documents . The situation in Albanian @-@ dominated Kosovo was quite different . There , Deva began recruiting Kosovo Albanians to join the Waffen @-@ SS . The 21st Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Skanderbeg ( 1st Albanian ) was formed on 1 May 1944 . Composed of ethnic Albanians , it was named after Albanian national hero George Kastrioti Skanderbeg , who fought the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century . Members took a religious oath using the Quran , pledging " jihad against unbelievers " . The division had a strength of 6 @, @ 500 men at the time of its creation and was better known for murdering , raping , and looting in predominantly Serbian areas than for participating in combat operations on behalf of the German war effort . On 14 May , members of the division raided Jewish homes in Pristina , arrested 281 native and foreign Jews , then handed them over to the Germans . On 23 June , 249 of these were taken to the Bergen @-@ Belsen concentration camp , where many were killed . With the Allied victory in the Balkans imminent , Deva and his men attempted to purchase weapons from withdrawing German soldiers in order to organize a " final solution " of the Slavic population of Kosovo . Nothing came of this as the powerful Yugoslav Partisans prevented any large @-@ scale ethnic cleansing of Slavs from occurring .

Kosovo Albanians were generally less hospitable to Jews than their counterparts in Albania . Due to their historical experiences with Serbs and the Ottoman Empire , they tended to be more unfriendly towards non @-@ Albanians . Many enthusiastically supported the Germans as a result . Claims have been made that Kosovo Albanians protected Jews after German forces took over territories that Italian authorities had controlled during the war , but the protection that Jews received in Kosovo in the early years of the war was due more to the Italian authorities than to the local Albanian population . It is estimated that 210 Jews from Kosovo perished during the war . An official Yugoslav state report published in 1964 recorded 74 Jewish wartime fatalities in the region . Approximately 600 Jews were killed in Albania , Kosovo and other Albanian @-@ controlled territories during the war . A somewhat greater number , as well as several hundred refugees , hid and survived with the assistance of the local Albanian population .

== Aftermath ==

From October to November 1944 , the Yugoslav Partisans , supported by both the Western Allies and the Soviet Union , and assisted by the forces of the newly anti @-@ fascist Bulgarian regime and two brigades of Albanian partisans , retook the region of Kosovo as the Germans withdrew .

The area was then reincorporated into the Federal People 's Republic of Yugoslavia . With defeat guaranteed , the withdrawing Germans helped Albanian collaborators escape the country as Communist forces drew closer . However , many failed to escape and were executed by the Communists upon capture . On 28 November 1944 , Communist forces under Enver Hoxha emerged victorious in Albania . Hoxha subsequently implemented a totalitarian Stalinist government which banned all religions in the country .

It is estimated that there were 1 @,@ 800 Jews in Albania at the end of the Second World War , eleven times more than the number of Jews living in the country at the beginning of the war . The Jewish community in Kosovo never fully recovered from the war . Few Jews remained in the region and many emigrated to Israel during the Communist period . Similarly , most Jews in Albania decided to emigrate following the Communist takeover , but approximately 300 remained in the country until the early 1990s . The official Albanian census of April 1989 recorded 73 Jews living in the country . With the fall of Communism , Albania eased restrictions on religion and foreign travel , which resulted in virtually the entire Jewish community of the country emigrating to Israel . From December 1990 to June 1991 , 350 Albanian Jews were airlifted from Albania to Israel in what was codenamed " Operation Flying Carpet " . Most of the 60 remaining Jews in the country left in 1997 , after an outbreak of political violence .

The Republic of Albania was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington , D.C. on 2 February 1995 . As of 2011 , 69 Albanians have been recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations for their role in helping Jews in Albania survive the Holocaust . The only public space in Albania dedicated to the Holocaust is a small display at the National Historical Museum in Tirana . Consisting of photographs , texts , maps , and wartime documents , it was opened on 29 November 2004 .