

## A short history of Serbs in Britain

The first records of a notable Serbian presence in the United Kingdom go back some 150 years, to the 1860s. No doubt there were Serbian people spending considerable amount of time in Britain or settling here before this time, but they would have most likely come from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Turkish Empire, republic of Dubrovnik or other parts of Europe where Serbs have lived for centuries. However, because they would have carried the nationality of the states where they resided, as opposed to defining themselves as Serbian, details are very hard to come by. However, we do know that **Dositej Obradović (1739 – 1811)**, a Serbian author, philosopher and linguist and Serbia's first Minister of Education, lived in London in 1784. He was, however, born in the Austrian Empire and was a citizen of that country throughout his life, and in fact spent most of his life travelling and living in many European countries. He spoke eight languages fluently (including German, English, French and Russian) and was a staunch proponent of European Enlightenment and Rationalism who influenced the nascent Serbian state to begin moving closer to Western European culture.

In the 1860s young educated Serbs from the newly established principality of Serbia were beginning to travel around Europe in numbers and study in various European centres of learning. Serbia being a very young country was looking to integrate into the European family and its young people were eager to learn and explore the established European countries and cultures.

As part of their European travels, a few of these Serbs reached Britain. They were individuals like **Vladimir Jovanović (1833 – 1922)**, born in 1833 in Sabac in Serbia, who had studied in Serbia and at the Universities of Vienna and Berlin, and who arrived in Britain in 1863. He was visiting to try and raise awareness of Serbia with the British public and to gain support for Serbia and its efforts to achieve full independence from the Ottoman Empire. Whilst in England he published a pamphlet entitled "*the Serbian Nation and the Eastern Question*".

Also, while living in Britain, Vladimir Jovanovic was very influenced by John Stuart Mill and was impressed by the British Parliamentary system. Under these influences he developed into a liberal thinker who stood for individual liberty, national liberation and universal education. His son, **Slobodan Jovanovic (1869, Novi Sad (Austria) – 1958, London)**, later wrote of his father that Vladimir would have liked to have been able to transpose the British system of Parliamentary democracy to Serbia "*lock, stock and barrel*" just like progressive agricultural practices and machinery were able to be taken back to Serbia and used there to increase productivity. Vladimir Jovanovic was one of the first Serbian Anglophiles and was the pioneer for a small but influential group of Anglophile Serbs who followed.

When Vladimir Jovanovic returned to Serbia, he pursued a career as an influential politician, political theorist, economist and journalist including a spell as Serbia's Minister of Finance.

## The first Serbian diplomats in London

Serbia began its quest for independence from the Turkish Empire in 1804 when Karadjordje Petrovic led the First Serbian Uprising which resulted in a *de-facto* autonomy of Serbia for over a decade. The Second Serbian Uprising against the Turks was led by Milos Obrenovic in 1815 and it resulted in a Treaty being signed with the local Turkish commander which laid

the ground for the declaration of the *de facto* autonomous Principality of Serbia in 1817. As part of this agreement, effectively allowing Serbia an informal autonomy, Serbia had to pay an annual tax to the Turkish Empire and allow a Turkish garrison to be stationed in Belgrade.

It is interesting to note that Britain had had its own envoy to Serbia as early as 1837, to keep an eye on developments there. Serbia had finally been granted formal autonomy as a dependency of the Turkish Empire only in 1830. While Serbia looked to Britain (amongst others) for help in its fight for full independence from the Turkish Empire throughout the nineteenth century, Britain on the other hand, was concerned to prevent the Russians from exerting too much influence in the Balkans and it was keen to preserve the status quo. This may explain why Britain had an envoy in Serbia right from the early beginnings of Serbian statehood.

Conversely, the first Serbian ambassador to Britain was appointed only in 1878, after the Congress of Berlin of that year had formally recognised the *de jure* independence of the sovereign state of Serbia.

The first Serbian ambassador to the Court of St. James was **Filip Hristic (1819 – 1905)**. He was a former Prime Minister of the Principality of Serbia (1860-1861) and a former Foreign Minister. It is a reflection of the importance which Serbia placed on its relationship with Britain that such a high profile person was appointed as its first ambassador between 1878 and 1883. On returning to Serbia, Filip Hristic became the first governor of the National Bank of Serbia.

In October 1884 **Cedomilj Mijatovic (1842, Belgrade – 1932, London)**, a leading Serbian anglophile, was appointed as the second Serbian ambassador in London. He had met his British wife, Elodie Lawton, in 1865 while he was studying economics in Leipzig in Germany and under her influence he had become a devoted anglophile, becoming the most influential Serbian translator from English in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among books he translated from English into Serbian were Henry Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* which were to influence a number of anglophile Serbs.

Before becoming ambassador in London, Cedomilj was a cabinet minister holding positions as both the Finance Minister and the Foreign Minister. His English wife was the first female historian in Serbia and published *The History of Modern Serbia* in London in 1872.

Mijatovic's first appointment as ambassador only lasted for a year, as he was dispatched to Bucharest to negotiate a peace treaty following a brief war between Serbia and Bulgaria in 1885. He was to be Serbia's ambassador to Britain two more times (between 1895 and 1900 and between 1902 and 1903). In the meantime, he spent most of his time living in London and wrote a number of novels in Serbian and a number of books in English including a historical study *Constantine the last Emperor of the Greeks; or the Conquest of Constantinople by the Turks*. Following the publication of this book he was elected an honorary member of the Royal Historical Society.

In 1903 the Serbian King Aleksandar Obrenovic and Queen Draga were assassinated by a conspiracy of Serbian Army officers. Queen Draga, who was a commoner and yet had exerted much influence over the King, was very unpopular in Serbia and this was the main cause of the conspiracy. Mijatovic immediately resigned from his post as ambassador and within weeks Britain had broken off diplomatic relations with Serbia. The assassination of

the Royal couple horrified the rest of Europe and damaged the reputation of Serbia in Britain for a number of years to come.

Following his resignation as ambassador, Mijatovic stayed in London for the rest of his life and published another five books in English as well as being a contributor to the Tenth and Eleventh editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. His book *Serbia and the Serbians* published in London in 1908 offered a favourable view of Serbia to the British public.

### **The First World War**

It was during the First World War that relations between Serbia and Britain became much closer while both countries fought together as allies. After the defeat of the Serbian army by the coalition of Austro-Hungarian, German and Bulgarian armies in November 1915 many Serbian intellectuals came to London to actively work to further Serbia's cause. At that time public opinion in Britain was very much pro-Serbian and there was an outpouring of compassion for the suffering of the Serbian people. British, (mainly Scottish), nurses were volunteering in large numbers to go to Serbia and the British government accepted some 300 Serbian school children to study in Britain.

With British public opinion very much in favour of Serbia, a group of British and Serbian intellectuals wanted to establish a special day in Britain to celebrate Serbia as an ally. A committee was set up consisting of 15 British and two Serbian members to promote the establishment of *Kosovo Day* as an appropriate tribute to the heroism of the Serbians in defending their homeland against the Austrians and the Germans. This may seem quite ironic now, bearing in mind recent developments, but at the time the committee's aim of "*disseminating knowledge of Serbia throughout Great Britain and drawing a tighter bond between the two countries*" was very popular. A *Kosovo Day* celebration was held on July 7, 1916 with lessons and lectures on Serbia throughout British schools and a Memorial service for the British and Serbian soldiers, doctors and nurses who had died in the defence of Serbia taking place in St Paul's cathedral.

During the First World War, the population of Serbia was decimated suffering more than 900,000 casualties (approximately 250,000 military and 650,000 civilian deaths caused by fighting, famine and one of the worst typhus epidemics in world history) which equated to some 20% of Serbia's pre-war population of 4.5 million.

During the First World War it was Serbs such as professor of philosophy, **Pavle Popovic** who came to London to work towards mobilising help for Serbia, but also to work towards the Yugoslav ideal. In Britain, Professor Popovic became a member of the *Yugoslav Committee* a group of Croat, Slovene and Serbian politicians and intellectuals promoting the unity of those peoples within a single country, and wrote a book entitled "*Yugoslav Literature*", published in Cambridge in 1918, where he sought to show that the three nations had a common literature. It was at this time that Serbs were generally pro-Yugoslav and in favour of Serbia leading the liberation of its sister nations of Croatia and Slovenia. With victory for the Allies in 1918 finally ending the war, Serbia led the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was formally approved at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and which later changed its name to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

In the years between the two World Wars a number of young Serbs continued to study and live in Britain including members of the Serbian and Yugoslav Royal Family, Prince Paul,

the Prince Regent who was educated at the University of Oxford and King Peter II, who was educated at Sandroyd School in Wiltshire. A leading Serb of the time was **Dimitrije Mitrinovic**, a pro-Yugoslav avant-garde thinker and publicist who was born in Bosnia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1887. Arriving in London during the First World War he supported the idea of a “United Europe” and became a leading member of the “New Europe” group in England, which propagated the pan-European ideal. They effectively anticipated the European Union long before it came into being. Many of his texts were published in the London based “*New Atlantis*” journal. Another was **Vane Ivanovic**, a true Yugoslav in his beliefs and ideals. Ivanovic’s mother and stepfather, who brought the young boy to England, were Serbs, his stepfather being from Dubrovnik, who owned Yugoslavia’s largest shipping company. Ivanovic was educated at Westminster School and Cambridge and became a member of the Yugoslav Olympic team at the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin competing in the 110-metre and 400-metre hurdles. At the outbreak of the Second World War Ivanovic placed 10 out of the 22 ships owned by his step father’s shipping company in the service of the British Navy, even though Yugoslavia was still a neutral country until it was invaded by Germany in April 1941.

### The Second World War

Yugoslavia was attacked by Germany in April 1941. Within a few weeks Germany with its allies, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria had invaded Yugoslavia whose government had no option but to surrender and go into exile. The government in exile was welcomed in London where most of its members remained for the rest of their lives. One of the most notable members of the Government in Exile was **Slobodan Jovanovic**, a distinguished lawyer and historian who had been a professor of law at the University of Belgrade since 1897 and was a former President of the Serbian Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as a member of the Yugoslav Academy of Science and Arts based in Zagreb in Croatia. He became the Deputy Prime Minister of the Yugoslav Government in Exile in London in 1941 and from January 1942 until June 1943 he was appointed Prime Minister of the Government in Exile. He had published more than a dozen historical studies of different periods of Serbian and European history including a book on “*English Parliamentarianism*” which was published in Serbia in 1902.

From June 1941 King Peter II of Yugoslavia also joined the Government in Exile as the titular head of state. He firstly completed his studies at Cambridge University before joining the Royal Air Force where he spent the rest of the war. The Government in Exile was supported within Yugoslavia by the remnants of the Royal Yugoslav Army who were mostly Serbs and who fought the occupying forces as a guerrilla movement under the name “Chetniks”. The Government in Exile appointed General Draza Mihailovic as the Chief-of-Staff of the Royal Yugoslav Army.

It is interesting to note that one of the most valuable intelligence agents working for the British Secret Service (M15) during the war was a Serb known by the codename “Tricycle”. His real name was **Dusko Popov (1912, Austro-Hungary – 1981, France)** and following the war he was granted British citizenship and awarded an OBE.

However, during the course of the War, the British Government increasingly shifted its support away from the Royalist Yugoslav resistance movement towards Tito’s communist Partisans who were seen as being more effective fighters against the occupying German and Italian troops. Under pressure from the British Government, the Prime Minister of the

Yugoslav Government in Exile at the time, Ivan Subasic, signed an Agreement with Tito in June 1944, where Tito would be appointed Chief-of Staff of the Yugoslav Army and lead the government until the people decided what form of government to choose in democratic elections after the war. While the Agreement recognised Tito's Partisans as the only legitimate legal force fighting the Nazi occupation, once they took over from the occupiers, rather than allow free elections, the communists staged a sham election in the autumn of 1945 which confirmed their absolute control over Yugoslavia.

Following the Communist takeover of Yugoslavia, once the Axis powers had been defeated, thousands of anti-communist Yugoslavs fled the country, including several thousand Serbian members of the Royal Yugoslav Army who fought as Chetniks during the war. A large number of Yugoslavs of Serbian origin were offered settlement in Britain. It was in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War that the first mass migration of several thousand Serbs to Britain took place. Most of the Serbian immigrants arriving at his time settled in and around London, particularly in West London, and also in the Midlands: Bradford, Leicester and Birmingham.

It is also interesting to note that the heir to the Yugoslav and Serbian throne, HRH Crown Prince Aleksandar was born in July 1945 in Suite 212 of Claridge's Hotel in London, which was declared Yugoslav territory by the British Parliament for the birth.

### **1950s – 1980s**

Most Serbs arriving in the late 1940s were political refugees. They looked to the Yugoslav Government in Exile and prominent countrymen, who had already settled in Britain, for leadership. It was for this purpose that a number of Serbian immigrant organisations were formed. At this time Vane Ivanovic, the prominent Yugoslav ship owner founded the Association of Free Citizens of Yugoslavia, a charity, financed mainly by himself for the purpose of helping Yugoslav émigrés arriving in Britain to integrate into British society.

In June 1951 one of the most influential immigrant organisations was formed, the Association of Serbian Writers Abroad (ASWA). The initiators included Slobodan Jovanovic, Dimitrije Mitrinovic, Milos Crnjanski, The Rev. Father Nikolaj Velimirovic and Desimir Tosic. The main activities of the ASWA focussed on organising public lectures of a very high calibre and they are in large part credited with forming the free and informed public opinion among the Serbs living in Britain. The lectures centred around the issues of interest to the Serbian immigrants including educational lectures and lectures on political developments in Yugoslavia.

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Britain and in particular Father Nikolaj Velimirovic helped many of the new arrivals to settle in Britain.

Another organisation formed at this time was “*Oslobodjenje*” (*Liberation*) which was led by Desimir Tosic and was to a large extent a continuation of the principles of the Democratic Party youth wing in Yugoslavia with the aim of establishing democracy and multi party politics in Serbia and Yugoslavia.

In the post war period prominent Serbian émigrés who shaped the Serbian community in Britain included Milos Crnjanski, Desimir Tosic and Borislav Pekic.

**Milos Crnjanski**, was a leading Serbian and Yugoslav modernist poet, author and diplomat, who had also worked as a professor of literature and a journalist and had spent a number of years as the cultural attaché at the embassies of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Berlin, Lisbon and Rome. At the beginning of World War II he was in Rome and from there he went to London where he spent more than twenty years. One of his most famous books is the “*Novel about London*” based on his experiences of immigrant life in Britain. For a time he was very active in Serbian immigrant circles and he was the first President of the Association of Serbian Writers Abroad. Following his experiences of the First World War, where he was drafted into the Austro Hungarian army as a Serb from Hungary, he became a leading anti-war poet, a Serbian Siegfried Sassoon. He also published “*Migrations*” a book about the great migration of Serbs from southern Serbia and Kosovo into Hungary during the 17th century, inspired by his own exile. “*Migrations*” is considered one of the most significant books in Serbian literature.

Another one of the most prominent Serbian émigrés in Britain was **Borislav Pekic**, a renowned writer who is considered one of the most important Serbian literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a former political prisoner who had been imprisoned between 1948 and 1953 for belonging to the youth wing of the Democratic Party, the “Yugoslav Democratic Youth”. Following his release he initially lived in Belgrade where he published his first book, “*Vreme Cuda*” in 1965 to high acclaim. This book was translated into English as “*The Time of Miracles*” and published in the USA in 1976. Having endured consistent harassment from the Communist authorities in Yugoslavia, following the publication of his second novel “*Hodocasce Arsenija Njegovana*” in 1970 (translated into English in 1978 as “The Houses of Belgrade”), which won the NIN award for the best Yugoslav novel of the year, Pekic left Belgrade to go into exile in London in 1971. The next twenty years were to mark his most productive period with the publication of his seminal work “*The Golden Fleece*”, published in eight volumes between 1978 and 1986. The Golden Fleece explores the wanderings of generations of a Serbian family and through them the complex history of the Balkans and has been compared by international critics to James Joyce’s “*Ulysses*”. Another seminal work published by Pekic between 1987 and 1990 is the trilogy “*Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*” (“The Years Devoured by Locusts”) based on Pekic’s memoirs providing an account of post-war life of the middle class in Yugoslavia being persecuted and imprisoned under communist rule. Parts of the trilogy have been translated into English and published in various literary journals. His book “*How to Quiet a Vampire*” has also been translated into English.

As well as writing novels, Pekic wrote a number of film screenplays the best known of which is the screenplay for the “*Time of Miracles*” which was selected to represent Yugoslavia at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. Pekic also worked for the BBC World Service in London between 1986 and 1991 reading his “*Letters from London*” weekly, with witty and inventive observations about England and English people. He also ran a series for the BBC World Service on the history of Great Britain which was published as a book in 1992 as the “*Sentimental History of the British Empire*”.

In 1990 Pekic again became actively involved in opposition politics in Serbia, re-joining the re-established Democratic Party in Belgrade and becoming its first Vice President. However, he remained based in London where he died in July 1992. He was vehement in his opposition to totalitarian power and communism in Yugoslavia and Serbia, a theme which permeated many of his books. Another prominent émigré who had also been a member of the youth wing of the Democratic Party in the 1940s and who became involved in opposition politics in 1990s was **Desimir Tosic**. In many ways he embodied what was best about the Serbian

immigrant community in great Britain: a belief in liberal ideas and ideals which were more important to him than any personal or material advantage. He lived as a political exile in London from 1958 and around him he gathered like-minded younger generation of Serbian refugees forming a group called “Oslobodjenje” (Liberation). His idea was that the group would stand for liberation from all forms of totalitarianism and dictatorship. He also became the editor of the “Nasa Rec” (Our Word) monthly publication which was one of the leading émigré Yugoslav dissident publications between 1948 and 1990. He was also a leading member of Jean Monnet’s European Movement with Vane Ivanovic and was one of the founders of the Democratic Alternative political grouping bringing together Serbs, Croats and Slovenes whose goal was to promote the democratisation of Yugoslavia. Throughout his life, and particularly in the 1990s when he spent much time in Serbia as a prominent member of the Democratic Party, and for a period of time as its Vice President, he was a staunch critic of Serbian nationalism being a true democrat at his core.

It is impossible to mention more than a few members of the Serbian immigrant community within such a short overview as this. However, it is important to acknowledge the thousands of hard working Serbs who, while less prominent in public life of the Serbian community in Britain, nevertheless formed the backbone of our community: the miners, factory workers, shopkeepers and builders, who all contributed to the integration of British Serbs within British society and community and whose children numbering thousands continue to feel a part of the distinct British-Serbian identity. Also, it is important to mention that many local sports clubs, Serbian Orthodox churches and charities raising money to help projects in Serbia are responsible for the growing strength of the Serbian community in Britain.

Although after draconian travel restrictions were lifted by the communist government in Yugoslavia in the mid 1960s, a significant number of “economic migrants” settled in Britain mainly arriving in the 1980s, but their numbers were never as large as the number of post-war political immigrants and their contribution to the Serbian immigrant community was less public. However, as well as being spurred on by economic opportunities many of them were also looking to start a new life in a free democratic society. Unlike Germany or some other countries, the Serbian immigrant community in Britain can be characterised as predominantly political in character, being anti-communist and pro-democratic in their views.

In the 1990s the violent break-up of Yugoslavia renewed an influx of Serbian exiles, people escaping war and nationalist politics, bringing a renewed energy to the Serbian community in Britain focused on opposing the flawed politics of totalitarianism in Serbia. But also the early 1990s were a time when democracy started developing in Serbia and the newly established opposition parties appointed their own representatives in London who canvassed for members among the immigrant community. Petar Jankovic became the representative of the Democratic Party in the early 1990s and later in the mid 1990s the Independent Serbian Information Centre was formed whose aim it was to be a voice in Britain for the moderate democratic minded Serbs.

Since 2000 things have changed again and the main drivers of the Serbian community in Britain are the Serbian Council, the Serbian Society and the Serbian City Club as well as publications including the newly founded quarterly “Britic” magazine for British Serbs. Since 2000 the Serbian community in Britain has found itself again able to give qualified support to some of the initiatives from the newly democratic Serbian regime in Belgrade for the first time in more than 60 years. Also, over the last few years, the Serbian community has had the breathing space due to the developing political stability in Serbia, to focus on its role and

position within Britain, and to start building distinct representation through various community organisations and to develop its voice in Britain on matters concerning British-Serbs as a distinct community.

### **A summary overview**

The Serbian immigrant presence in Britain can be divided into two distinct periods: between 1860 and 1940, being a period of predominantly European integration of the newly established Serbia and later Yugoslavia, where immigrants were focused on learning about Europe, democracy and the most advanced economic, philosophical and technological developments. Many of the Serbian immigrants during this period, were temporary immigrants, returning to Serbia following completion of their education and training in Britain, and they made a significant contribution to the development of Serbia. This period of positive integration and learning was followed by more than 50 years of political exile and struggle to bring liberal democracy to Yugoslavia and Serbia. This is reflected in the political profile of Serbian immigrants arriving in Britain from the 1940s onwards and the Serbian immigrant organisations which were established in Britain during this period. However, this was also a very creative time with Borislav Pekic and Milos Crnjanski writing some of their best literary works in exile in London. Since the democratic changes which took place in Serbia in October 2000, a new focus for British-Serbs has developed once again: as well as better communication with democratic institutions in Belgrade, a distinct focus on developing a voice within Britain for the British-Serbian community.

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January 2009

Prepared for the presentation in the Houses of Parliament on 13 January 2009: “*Serbian community in Great Britain – the next generation*”