

Anti-Semitism Raises its Head in Serbia

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Though very small in number, Serbia's Jewish community is being increasingly targeted by an array of ultra-nationalist groups.

The slogans hint at a future settling of accounts. "Juden Raus", "Achtung Juden", "Jews out of Serbia" and "Death to Jews and Gypsies", they proclaim, the words providing a chilling echo of the Holocaust that decimated European Jewry more than half a century ago.

But few Jews actually see these slogans in Serbia today. Providing ample proof of the claim that anti-Semitism doesn't need Jews to flourish, the latest wave of anti-Semitism in Serbia has broken over a community that is a shadow of its former self.

The community is now down to a tiny 3,000 or so among Serbia's total population of around eight million, and in the 2002 census only about 1,200 people declared themselves Jewish.

Most Serbs have never even met a Jew. Even before the Second World War, the community was small, making up 0.45 per cent of the population.

After the Holocaust and the migration of most survivors to Israel, the figure has dwindled further to 0.3 per cent.

But while few Jews remain, anti-Semitism is flourishing. Many bookstores stock copies of the infamous Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, the early 20th-century book from Russia that fraudulently claimed to reveal a Jewish conspiracy against the world's non-Jewish, and especially Christian, population.

More disturbingly, a list of prominent Serbian Jews was recently posted on the website of a neo-Nazi organisation, alongside messages posted by site visitors calling for them to be killed.

Although Stormfront is a German group, most Serbian commentators conclude that they could only have obtained this list with the help of Serbian colleagues.

The list includes prominent activists and artists, such as the head of the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Sonja Licht, actor Predrag Ejdus, singer Djordje David, marketing expert Srdjan Saper and the head of the Union of Jewish Communities, Aca Singer.

A catalogue of anti-Semitic literature in Serbian, which it says "every National Socialist and racially aware nationalist should read" is contained on the site on a page named "Serbian National Socialist Library".

Among the recommended texts is an article entitled "Jews - the Enemies of the Balkan Peoples."

Professor Ratko Bozovic, a sociologist at Belgrade University, told IWPR, "These incidents are not isolated. They are part of a growing phenomenon."

Other experts agree that Serbia is becoming a hotbed of extreme racist ideologies - partly a consequence of a decade of warfare under Slobodan Milosevic, when the media painted Croats, Muslims and Albanians as the demonic enemies of innocent Serbs.

At the beginning of the wars in Yugoslavia, the regime initially tried to link Serbs and Jews as joint victims of fascism during the Second World War, promoting the activities of front organisations such as the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Society.

But when this initiative failed to achieve the desired result internationally, anti-Jewish propaganda began to circulate, including claims that Serbs were falling victim to a Jewish lobby in Washington.

This propaganda reached a climax during the 1999 NATO air strikes over Kosovo, when Jews in President Bill Clinton's administration were accused of being behind a master-plan to bomb Serbia.

Bozo Prelevic, a Belgrade lawyer, says belief in an anti-Serb conspiracy among the Jews is a legacy of the Milosevic era, when the regime media began to list Jews and Freemasons among all the other schemers plotting Serbia's misfortunes.

Even after democratic parties took power in October 2000, Serbian society continued to blame others for its problems, Professor Bozovic says - regardless of whether these others are Roma, Jews, Albanians, Americans, the Hague tribunal or rich investors, whom many see as economic colonisers.

A casual surf of right-wing web sites in Serbia reveals an abundance of anti-Semitic literature and propaganda.

The site of the Serbian Defence League, an organisation which says its mission is to document the Zionist "genocide against the Serbs", features the claim that "research has uncovered that Jews in position of power were conspiring to break up Yugoslavia into states friendly with Israel, because it needed their votes in the UN Security Council".

The organisation claims Jews were directly responsible for NATO's bombing of Serbia in the late Nineties. "The Jews introduced resolutions [to the UN] to bomb the Serbs and make them pay for what Israel is doing to Moslems," it says.

The Serbian Defence League says Jews have "stolen the Serbian holocaust" because "the biggest genocide in World War II was committed against the Serbs in Nazi Croatia, and not against the Jews in Germany".

Aca Singer, veteran leader of the diminished Jewish community in Serbia, says the wave of hostile graffiti, as well as the threatening messages on various websites, are a cause for concern.

The community has now filed six criminal-law cases against the perpetrators but there is little hope that anything will be done.

The websites are located abroad, so neither the police nor the courts can take action and there is no law penalising the propagation of hatred on the internet.

Singer says it is significant that anti-Semitic incidents have increased since the fall of the Milosevic regime in October 2000. He believes this may be because the advent of democracy has released feelings about Jews that were previously well concealed.

"In the past five years over a hundred anti-Semitic books have been published in Serbia," said Singer.

"Some of the latest are 'The Serbs In The Claws Of The Jew' and 'Jewish Ritual Murder'. The latter, published by IHTUS Christian Books, says

Jews kill Christian children in order to knead bread with their blood."

The IHTUS web site features copious amounts of anti-Semitic literature and calumnies. An article entitled "Ritual Murder among Jews" repeats all the old medieval libels against Jews as killers of innocent Christians.

"When a ritual murder is carried out for [the Jewish feast of] Purim," it says, "then the victim is usually a grown-up Christian.

"This blood is then dried and mixed with baking powder to make triangular cakes.... It is possible to use the dried blood left over from the murder at Purim for the upcoming Passover festival."

The IHTUS publishing house is a privately-owned company, whose headquarters are in Zabalj in Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia.

Publisher in chief Ratibor Djurdjevic was a member of a right-wing, pre-Second World War organisation named Dimitrije Ljotic. After emigrating to the US, Djurdjevic returned to Serbia in 1990.

Djurdjevic expounds his views on the website, claiming his books are important for Serbs and Christians because they disclose information about "the powerful, but unrecognised rulers of the world – Jewish bankers. They are the most important collaborators of Satan in his evil enterprise against Jesus Christ."

He adds that these unnamed Jewish bankers have brought much evil to the Serbs, having "started the war against the Serbs; provided assistance to the disintegrating forces in Yugoslavia; set Bosnia on fire; imposed a cruel embargo on Serbia and Montenegro; armed the Croats and Muslims... [and] demonised Serbs all over the world".

The Serbs are an obstacle to the forces of Jewish conquest in the Balkans, he argues. Djurdjevic's site promises future publications in a similar vein.

IWPR tried to contact Djurdjevic, using the email and telephone number listed on his website, but without success.

However, Branislav Jakovljevic, a director of IHTUS, told IWPR that their books did not accuse all Jews of crimes against Christians, merely some.

“It is a sin to accuse all Jews,” he said. “Amongst them there are ordinary people who haven't sinned against God.”

The problem begins, he added, with “the European and American media who are run by Jewish bankers and who are responsible for creating a bad image of Serbs”.

Anti-Semitism in Serbia is not limited to discussions on foreign-registered websites and slogans painted anonymously on walls, however.

It reaches young people through organisations such as Obraz, which target students and other young people with their hardline nationalist message.

Obraz, which means “Honour” is a right-wing movement preaching allegiance to the Serbian Orthodox Church and to Serbdom in general and encouraging passionate hostility to a list of what it calls enemies of the nation and the church.

Mladen Obradovic, president of Obraz, told IWPR that Obraz’s core values were love of God and good will to people, regardless of where they come from.

But their website tells a different story. A mission statement on the site contains a strongly-worded “Proclamation to the Enemies of Obraz”, who are defined as “Zionists, converts to Islam, Ustashe [Croat fascists], democrats, false pacifists, perverts, criminals and drug addicts”.

The above groups “shall be justly punished, because they should not be allowed to ruin the health of Serbian youth”, the proclamation adds menacingly.

Obradovic was more nuanced in describing Obraz’s stance on Jews to IWPR.

“Because we are Christians, we cannot and do not want to hide the truth that many Euro-Atlantic powerful people of Jewish origin have revealed themselves as open enemies of the Serbian people,” he said.

“Differentiating between enemies and friends cannot be called anti-Semitism,” he added. According to Obradovic, the only people in danger in Serbia today were the Serbs themselves.

How far such views reach down to ordinary people is open to question.

According to a survey in 2003 by the Belgrade Centre for Studying Alternatives, a think-tank specialising in tracking public opinion, anti-Semitism was more widespread than many once thought.

Nine per cent of respondents openly declared themselves as anti-Semites, while another 31 per cent said they were undecided, the survey said.

Many people on the street seem confused in their understanding of history and ready to blame Jews for their country’s recent setbacks.

One taxi driver told IWPR that “Hitler was Jewish and the fact that they [the Nazis] killed millions of their own people is evidence of how bad they are”.

He said Jews were responsible for the destruction of Yugoslavia because “Tito was Jewish”. He added, “The Jews wanted to destroy Yugoslavia for their own economic interests”.

Another woman interviewed on the street said Jews exaggerated the dangers of anti-Semitism for their own benefit. “Jews use anti-Semitism on purpose to gain privileges for themselves,” she said.

According to Belgrade University professor of psychology Zarko Trebjesanin, anti-Semitism appeals to the many losers in Serbia’s troubled society.

“Anti-Semites are people who feel unfulfilled, so they often identify strongly with their own race,” he said. “These people suffer from inferiority complexes and seek an identity in the collective, embracing extremist theories in the process.”

Trebjesanin pointed out that many Serbs had died while trying to save the Jews from the Holocaust, “The Yad Vashem Centre in Jerusalem has cited 113 names from Serbia among the 19,141 righteous”, a reference to the people honoured for saving Jews.

While the websites continue churning out their poison, most of Serbia’s remaining Jews say they feel calm, while calling for the government to react more firmly.

Aca Singer says the current legal penalties against the dissemination of hate-filled views are too weak.

“The penal code should include a provision on anti-Semitism as a criminal offence,” he said.

Serbia’s poor economic situation is one factor behind the upsurge of anti-Semitism, he added.

“Jews have been suspected by many nations throughout history. Particularly so if you take into account the deeply-rooted belief that the Jews control global financial and political developments.”

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