

ALBANIANS

In Asia, Albanian settlements exist throughout Turkey, especially in Istanbul and Bursa, and in Damascus, Syria. The large Albanian colony in Egypt, dating from the nineteenth century, has all but disappeared. Albanians first arrived in Turkey as conscripts for the Turkish janissary forces (the janissaries were established in the fourteenth century) and subsequently for the Ottoman forces in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A second wave of Albanians, from Kosovo and southern Serbia, arrived from the 1930s through the 1960s. The Serbs deported several hundred thousand of these Kosovo Albanians from Yugoslavia against their will under the absurd pretence that, as Muslims, they were Turks.

In Albania, the Albanians form two cultural groups separated by the Shkumbin River: the northern Albanians or Ghegs, sometimes spelled Gegs, and the southern Albanian or Tosks. Though dialect and cultural differences between the Ghegs and Tosks can be substantial, both sides identify strongly with their common national and ethnic culture, and both speak dialects of Albanian, an Indo-European language.

In Europe, in addition to the Republic of Albania with its centrally located capital city of Tirana, Albanians live in ethnically compact settlements in other large areas of the southwest Balkan Peninsula. The Republic of Albania, which includes only about 60 percent of all Albanians in the Balkans, is a mountainous country along the southern Adriatic coast across from the heel of Italy. An approximately 10 percent Albanian minority population lives north of Albania in Montenegro, in regions along the Albanian-Montenegrin border. Northeast of Albania is the United Nations-administered territory of (the self-proclaimed Republic of) Kosova, also known as Kosovo, technically a part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Kosovo's population is about 90 percent Albanian speakers. East of the Republic of Albania is the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, about one-third of which, along the Albanian border, has an Albanian majority.

There are no reliable figures for the (largely assimilated) Albanian population living in Asia (mainly Turkey), but there are an estimated six million Albanians in Europe. Of these, about three and a half million live in the Republic of Albania, about two million in Kosova, about half a million in the Republic of Macedonia, and about 100,000 in Montenegro. There are also large Albanian minorities in Italy and Greece.

Albania is on the border dividing three great religions: Islam, Greek Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism. Approximately 70 percent of Albanians in the Republic of Albania are Muslim. Among them are the Bektashi, a Muslim sect closely linked to the Albanian nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century. About 20 percent of Albanians, mostly in the south, are of Orthodox background; and about 10 percent, mostly in the north of the country, are of Catholic background. Albanian history is intertwined with that of the Ottoman empire. Albanians were the backbone of much of the Ottoman military and administrative system. Many Albanians rose from the ranks of the janissaries to high offices in the Ottoman empire; some even became ministers and prime ministers of the imperial court.

Further Reading

- Hall, Derek (1994). *Albania and the Albanians*. London: Pinter.
- Jacques, Edwin E. (1995). *The Albanians: An ethnic history from prehistoric times to the present*. Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co.
- Vickers, Miranda (1994). *Albania: A modern history*. London & New York: I. B. Tauris.

[Published in: *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. David Levinson, Karen Christensen, et al. (ed.). Vol. 1., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002, p. 79-81.]