

The Bahá'í Faith in Europe¹

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This chapter outlines the early interest in the Bábí-Bahá'í religions in Europe, and its early beginnings in Paris, London, and Stuttgart. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's two trips to western and central Europe during 1911–1913 provided a major impetus to these early communities and generated considerable media interest. Over the next few decades, detailed information on Bahá'í communities is provided in official Bahá'í yearbooks and related publications, which show that the number of local and national groups steadily grew throughout western Europe. A major increase in the number of countries opened to the Bahá'í Faith occurred during 1953 to 1963 as part of an international plan, and large numbers of individuals converted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Local Spiritual Assembly numbers, which provide a consistent and reliable metric to examine Bahá'í growth, increased from the 1940s until the late 1990s, but have declined since then. Despite this, many individual Bahá'í countries have continued to grow numerically, partly due to immigration, particularly from Iran. In addition, a closer look at Bahá'í statistics demonstrate the relative strength of some island nations, including Iceland. New communities formed in central and eastern Europe from the 1990s, which remain thinly spread. Notable European Bahá'ís have come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including the arts, sciences, and sport. Two themes stand out in terms of the wider European Bahá'í contribution to the international Bahá'í community: Bahá'í literature

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and scholarship, and public relations work, particularly in relation to the persecution of Iran's Bahá'ís.

Europe has a rich Bahá'í history with a number of the oldest and most established Bahá'í communities worldwide. The impact of two visits between 1911 and 1913 by 'Abdu'l-Bahá assisted in the strengthening of these early communities and the religion's emergence to a wider public. Some northern European Bahá'í communities experienced growth from the 1950s, and, in the 1990s, new Bahá'í groups were established in central and eastern Europe. In 2021, there are Bahá'ís resident in every European country apart from the Vatican City. Communities are thinly spread throughout the continent with the largest Bahá'í communities in the UK and Germany. Important contributions have been made by European Bahá'í communities in the areas of Bahá'í studies and public relations.

Early interest in the Bábí-Bahá'í religions

The early history of the Bábí-Bahá'í religions was documented in European newspapers, mentioned by some public figures, and came to the attention of a few diplomats and orientalists. In 1845, *The Times* of London reported on the persecution of the Bábís, which is the first such report in any western-language newspaper (Momen 1981: 4). Some European diplomats and orientalists started writing about the Bábís in the 1860s. Early examples include the French diplomat Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau in his 1865 book, *Religion et philosophies dans l'Asie centrale*, and the orientalist A.K. Kazembek, who taught at St Petersburg University and wrote a book on the Bábís, also published in 1865 (Ioannesyan 2013: 30). Hungarian orientalist Arminius (Armin) Vambery published a volume in German

in 1867, *Meine Wanderungen und Erlebnisse in Persien*. In relation to the Báb and the Bábí movement, the first public mention and presentation in Europe was probably made by Matthew Arnold, a poet and cultural critic (and author of the poem *Dover Beach*), speaking in 1871 at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, in Birmingham, England. With regards to the Bahá'í Faith, the first public mention appears to have been made by Professor Edward Granville Browne, an academic orientalist, who spoke at the Literary Society of Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1889 and quoted Bahá'u'lláh's words, 'Ye are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch', in a lecture at the South Place Institute, London, in 1890. In other European countries, there are no recorded public presentations until Gabriel Sassi, who was commissioned by the Martinist Order, gave an address on the Bahá'í religion at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (Smith 2007: 109).

Browne had become interested in the religion after reading Gobineau and wrote monographs and academic articles about the Bábí-Bahá'í religions and a book, *A Year Among the Persians* (1893), about his experiences of travelling throughout Persia and meeting Bábí, Azalis and Bahá'ís. He continued to write some academic articles, although his interest waned after the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 (Cole 2012: 485). Russian orientalists were involved in early translations. Baron Rosen, who was based at St Petersburg University, published a Russian translation of one of Bahá'u'lláh's texts in 1893. He deposited many manuscripts and letters at the St Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts. One of his students, A.G. Tumansky, who met some notable early Bahá'ís in Ashkhabad from 1890, also published translations, including of Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*) in 1899 (Ioannesyan 2013: 8). A.L.M. Nicolas, who had been first interpreter at the French legation at Tehran, published several early translations of Bábí texts during 1902–

1914. Leo Tolstoy became interested in the Bábí-Bahá'í religions towards the end of his life, and he made a number of contrasting statements about its influence on his thinking (Collins and Jasion 1991).

Direct encounters between Europeans and Babi-Baha'i leaders

There were some direct contacts with the religion's central figures. Among the most notable was that of the court-appointed physician, Dr William Cormick, who was born in Iran from an Irish family, and medically assessed the Báb at the request of the governor of Azerbaijan, Crown Prince Naşiru'd-dín Mírzá in the summer of 1848 (Flannery 2004). Some years later, Cormick recalled that the Báb said that all Europeans would 'come over to his religion', and that the Báb was observed to be reading the Bible in prison (Amanat 1989: 391). Other important encounters are those of Browne with Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká in 1890 (Cole 2012: 485). Browne's pen-portrait of Bahá'u'lláh has been widely published, partly as it included the quote, 'Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind'. Browne's scholarship on the religion was influential but became increasingly critical, partly due to Bahá'í quietism during the Constitutional Revolution.

Beginnings – first communities in Paris, London, and Stuttgart

The first communities in Europe were formed at the start of the 20th century. One centre of activity was Paris. Phoebe Hearst, an early American Bahá'í who was a wealthy heiress and philanthropist, travelled through Paris in 1898 on her way to visit 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Palestine, and encouraged May Bolles (later May Maxwell), who had moved to Paris in 1894, and Mary

Thornburgh-Cropper, an American living in London, to join her on this trip. On her return to Paris, Bolles introduced the Bahá'í teachings to notable early converts such as Agnes Alexander, who was the first Bahá'í teacher in Hawaii, Japan, and Korea; Thomas Breakwell, an early English Bahá'í (and who died in Paris in 1902); Hippolyte Dreyfus, the first French believer (who translated some Bahá'í texts and wrote an introductory book); and to expatriate Americans including Laura Clifford Barney, Charles Mason Remey, Juliet Thompson, Marion Jack, and Sydney Sprague, who all became prominent Bahá'í teachers. Lady Blomfield and her daughter heard of the Faith in 1907 in Paris from Bertha Herbert, who later married Horace Holley (Fazel and Hassall 1998: 36). Holley was another notable Bahá'í who first heard of the Faith in Paris in 1909, and later became one of the most prominent American Bahá'ís and was appointed a Hand of the Cause in 1951. In 1899, there are also reports of Baha'is residing in Italy. Edith Burr, an American Bahá'í who published a book of poetry and lived in Florence, and Maria Forni, of Polish background, who lived in Crevenna near Lake Como, where she ran a private school for children with physical disabilities (Hoagg, *Baha'i News* 1930: 8).

Other centres were in London and Stuttgart. When Mary Thornburgh-Cropper returned to the UK, she told her friend Ethel Rosenberg, a miniaturist painter, about the religion. Rosenberg became the first native British Bahá'í in 1899, and organised some meetings mainly in London (Osborn 2014b: 89). Two Germans, Dr Karl Edwin Fischer and Alma Knobloch, who became Bahá'ís in America, returned to Germany, in 1905 and 1907, respectively, and started Bahá'í activities in Stuttgart (Stockman 1996: 35). Knobloch was an effective teacher and gave the first public address in Germany in 1907, and also travelled to Switzerland and Austria to speak about the Bahá'í Faith. A short-lived committee was set up

around this time to organise further events, the first such consultative body in Europe. In 1913, there were more Bahá'ís in Germany than in all other European countries, mostly centred on Stuttgart but with communities in neighbouring towns, and 63 individuals signed a letter to 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Stockman 1996: 38). One other country with recorded Bahá'ís was the Netherlands, where George Enzlin considered himself a Bahá'í around 1913, and who spoke to a theosophical society about the religion (De Vries 2012: 95).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels

A key event for these nascent communities was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's two journeys during 1911–1913 where he visited Switzerland, France, Germany, Hungary, Austria, England, and Scotland. In his first trip, from August to December 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited France, Switzerland, and then travelled to England, where he stayed with Lady Blomfield in London. He visited Bristol, where he met the poet Ezra Pound and Wellesley Tudor Pole, a prominent figure in the early Baha'i community whose connections assisted the process by which General Allenby's army released 'Abdu'l-Baha from prison in Palestine (McNamara 2014). Abdu'l-Bahá also made a day trip to Oxford, where he spoke at the University at Manchester College as a guest of a biblical scholar, Professor Thomas Kelly Cheyne, who considered himself a follower of the Bahá'í religion.

In his second visit, from December 1912 to June 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited England, Scotland, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. He visited Edinburgh and spoke at New College, followed by eight days in Germany (Stuttgart, Esslingen, and Bad Mergentheim), and also Budapest, where he met a number of prominent persons and academics, including the orientalist Arminius Vambery and Ignaz Goldziher (Lederer 2004: 109–126). In these

places, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke with local people involved in progressive causes, including suffragettes, Esperantists, and those affiliated with new spiritual movements of the time, such as the Theosophists. The public impact of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visits in Europe has been chronicled (Jasion 2016, Egea 2017, Egea 2018).

These visits provided some impetus to the early Bahá’í communities of England, Scotland, France, and Germany, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá meeting with early Bahá’ís confirmed their beliefs. In addition, it strengthened ties with progressive movements at the time, especially Theosophists, suffragettes, and Esperantists. Further, the media interest generated by his visit, including in national and regional newspapers such as *The Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Scotsman*, *Oxford Times*, and *Nieuwe Rottadamsche Courant*, was a small but important part of the emergence of the Bahá’í Faith from obscurity (Egea 2018: 461). This continued with Bahá’í presentations at large multi-faith conferences—in 1924, there were two (one of which was read by Mountford Mills and another by Ruhi Afnan) at a London ‘Conference of Some Living Religions Within the British Empire’ (Hare 1924: 736; Bahá’í World 1928: 225). In 1936, George Townshend presented at the World Congress of Faiths (Bahá’í World 1937: 614–19).

Development of Bahá’í communities throughout Europe

After the first world war (1914–18), there was increasing activity, especially in Germany, where many new Bahá’í groups were established, and a magazine (*Sonne der Wahrheit*) was printed (Smith 1989: 449). In a survey of the Bahá’í world in 1919–1920, John Esslemont, a prominent British adherent, noted interest among university students and professors in Switzerland, and that there was one Bahá’í in Greece and one in Yugoslavia (Momen 2004:

102). The Bahá'í communities in England and Germany continued to expand, and in 1923, national Spiritual Assemblies (NSAs) were formed for the British Isles and one for Germany and Austria.

From 1925, more detailed information is provided in official Bahá'í yearbooks (see table). There were Bahá'ís living in eight countries: Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, and European Russia. The first *Bahá'í Year Book* (1925–26) identified two Bahá'í 'centres' in France, two in Austria, two in Switzerland, three in Italy, three in England, and 26 in Germany. The strength of the German Bahá'í community was also apparent from its four magazines in 1926—'the official magazine', a quarterly one published by the Committee of Education of the NSA of Germany, a children's magazine (*Das Rosengaertlein*), and *Mitteilungen*, the bulletin of the Bahá'í assembly of Hamburg (Bahá'í Year Book 1926: 103). Of the worldwide total of 11 magazines, four were in German. The number of countries increased from 8 in 1925 to 11 in 1928 with the addition of Denmark, Norway, and Yugoslavia (Smith 2015: 352–69). Individual Bahá'ís also started to reside in Sweden (1920), Denmark (1925), and Norway (1927). In 1926–28, a list of Spiritual Assemblies includes four in England (London, two in Manchester, Dorset), one in France (Paris), one in Switzerland (Lausanne) and five in Germany. Bahá'í 'groups' were also present in Denmark (Copenhagen); Austria (Graz, Vienna); Italy (Portofino ['in summer only'], Florence, Como, Torino, Genoa); Switzerland (Geneva, Yvorne [or Vand, where Forel, a renowned Bahá'í scientist, lived], and Zurich; and Sweden (Boviken and Uddevalla) (Bahá'í World 1928: 182–187; Bahá'í World 1930: 218). Groups were used to describe wherever two or more Bahá'ís resided and where Spiritual Assemblies were not formed.

A 1928 survey of Bahá'í activities reported regular public meetings in London and Manchester, that the Parisian community 'maintained Bahá'í meeting-places conducted in both the French and English languages' (Bahá'í World 1928: 28), and increasing interest in Germany, partly through links with Esperantists. Despite this, the British and French groups remained quite small, with less than a hundred people until the 1930s, and the other communities remained even smaller (Smith 1989). There was also an 'International Bahá'í Bureau' in Geneva that acted as a meeting place for 'Bahá'ís coming to Geneva though their interest in the activities of the League of Nations and of other international bodies centred in Geneva' (Bahá'í World 1928: 30). It published a magazine in German, French, and English.

New groups were established in the late 1920s, and by 1930, three new countries had a Bahá'í presence (the Netherlands, Hungary, and Poland). There were 14 Bahá'í 'assemblies and groups' in England and 38 in Germany. New groups were reported in Budapest, Enschede (the Netherlands), Oslo, Warsaw, and Capraz (Yugoslavia), and 'young people's Bahá'í groups' in Uddevalla (Sweden) and five German cities. A number of German academics were reported to be studying the Bahá'í Faith (Root 1928: 300–311). In 1932–34, there were local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs) in Austria (Vienna), Bulgaria (Sofia), Germany (with seven) and England (London and Manchester). New Bahá'í groups were reported in Tirana (Albania); Antwerp (Belgium); Plovdiv, Sofia, Turnovo, and Varna (Bulgaria); Brno, Prague, and Pressburg (Czechoslovakia); Gyor (Hungary); Radviliskis and Yoniskis (Lithuania); and Bucharest (Romania). There is uncertainty about some of these countries, as later official Bahá'í sources suggest that Albania and Lithuania were not opened to the religion during 1921-1953 (Bahá'í World 1970: 460–461), and Lithuania was opened in 1977 (Bahá'í World 1981: 105). The number of countries with Bahá'í groups but no assemblies

increased in 1932–34 (with eight groups in Switzerland, four in the Netherlands, three in Italy, three in Sweden, three in Austria, and two in Norway) (Bahá'í World 1936: 426–432).

Nordic countries followed a similar pattern. First Bahá'ís were individuals who had converted in the US. However, they were unable to attract more converts, and these communities did not grow until the 1940s and 1950s. For example, in Sweden, August Ruud and Edvark Olsson, who had become Bahá'ís in the US and lived in Kenosha and Chicago, moved back to Sweden in 1920 and 1922, respectively (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Norway 2020). However, the first local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) in Sweden, which was in Stockholm, was formed more than 25 years later, in 1948. A Norwegian, Johanna Schubarth, who became a Bahá'í in Urbana, Illinois, moved back to Norway in 1927, but there were no other Bahá'ís in Norway until 1946 (when Solveig Corbit pioneered there) (Khan 2003: 191). The first LSA there was in Oslo in 1948. In 1925, Johanne Sorensen, a Dane, converted during a short stay in Honolulu and returned to Denmark (Warburg 2004: 233). However, the next converts occurred in the late 1940s, when two American women (Dagmar Dole and Eleanor Hollibaugh) moved to Denmark, which paved the way for 38 Danes to declare as Bahá'ís during 1948–1951. The first LSA was formed in 1949 (Warburg 2004: 243).

In 1939, there were Bahá'ís in 22 countries throughout the continent, with the addition of Finland, Irish Free State, and Iceland (Table). However, outside of Great Britain and Germany, the presence was very small. These two countries made up 40 of the 91 localities in 1939, and 11 of the 14 LSAs (Bahá'í World 1942: 688–92). However, the Bahá'í community in Germany was outlawed in 1937 by the Nazis because of the religion's seemingly international and pacifist¹ teachings (Smith 1989), and property was confiscated

and some Bahá'ís were imprisoned. In Poland, a prominent Bahá'í of Jewish origin, Lydia Zamenhof, who was an active promotor of Esperanto that her father Ludwik Zamenhof invented, was killed in the Treblinka concentration camp. The second world war brought a suspension to Bahá'í activities in occupied European countries. In Britain, this was not the case, and the community was active and continued to grow.

Intensive efforts were made to re-establish communities in Western Europe following the war, including Bahá'ís moving from North America. This led to local Bahá'í communities being established in all northern and western European countries (Sprague 1949: 11). In 1949, these North American Bahá'ís ('pioneers') established communities in Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain; the German national Spiritual Assembly was reformed; and there were 142 localities and 41 LSAs (Bahá'í World 1952: 520–74). There was also a scattering of Bahá'ís in central and eastern Europe but governments allowed no formal Bahá'í activities in countries that were part of the Soviet sphere of influence. Thus, in 1949, Bahá'ís were thinly spread in most countries in mainland Europe, with no Bahá'í presence in Greece, Austria, Romania, and a few small states (such as Liechtenstein, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, and the Vatican City), and a larger community in the British Isles (Smith 2015).²

**Table: Countries where Bahá'í communities existed in 1926
and subsequent years of establishment**

1926	1928	1930	1932	1939	1949
Austria	Denmark	Holland	Albania	Finland	Luxembourg
France	Norway	Hungary	Belgium	Iceland	Portugal
Germany	Yugoslavia	Poland	Bulgaria	Irish Free State	Spain

Great Britain			Czecho-slovakia		
Italy			Lithuania (?)		
Sweden			Romania		
Switzerland					
European Russia					

One other aspect of early European Bahá'í history was its role in diplomatic work, particularly on behalf of the persecuted Iranian Bahá'ís. This started with European diplomats who lobbied to stop the persecution of Bábís. The British were instrumental in safeguarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life during the First World War. By the 1920s, this work continued in the 'International Bahá'í Bureau' headed by Jean Stannard in Geneva (Bahá'í World 1928: 30).

Another important event was the passing of Shoghi Effendi in London in 1957. His resting place at New Southgate cemetery remains an important place for Bahá'ís to visit from all over the world and a place of prayer. The first Bahá'í World Congress was held in London in 1963 at the Royal Albert Hall. Around 6,000 Bahá'ís attended and the first Universal House of Justice was announced and presented at the congress. The only Bahá'í House of Worship in Europe is in Langenhain village on the outskirts of Frankfurt. In 1953, the first application was made to purchase land for such a building but the process was complicated by opposition by local Protestant and Catholic churches, and planning refusals and appeals. Work started in 1960 and it was opened in 1964 (Bahá'í World 1970: 733–741) with a distinctive concrete and glass modernist design.

Institutional developments and growth since the Second World War in Europe

With increasing numbers of new Bahá'ís in Europe, developing Bahá'í institutions and communities became important. Four periods of institutional development can be outlined. The first was the establishment of local and national Bahá'í bodies from 1920s onwards, as described above. The second was a major international plan ('The Ten Year Crusade') to increase the number of localities, 1953–1963. This was the first unified international plan of the Bahá'í world. In its first year, Bahá'ís moved to Andorra, the Canary Islands, Greece, Cyprus, Liechtenstein, Malta, and San Marino (Bahá'í World 1970). This movement of Bahá'ís continued throughout these years, with Bahá'ís coming particularly from North America and Iran. In some European countries, this changed communities significantly. For example, 17 Iranians arrived in Denmark in 1961 to add to a community of 59 people (Warburg 2004: 246).

The third was a steady increase in the population of Bahá'ís in the 1970s as local people joined the religion (rather than having moved into such areas). Much of the increase in the early 1970s came from young, single people who were part of a wider countercultural movement. An example is Denmark, where the community doubled in size when 80 people converted from 1971–1974 (Warburg 2015). Nevertheless, Iranian immigration remained important—32 Bahá'ís moved to Denmark between 1975 and 1990 (Warburg 1995: 189).

Finally and fourth, following the collapse of communism, there was a new period of institution building in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s coordinated by the Bahá'í World Centre, who encouraged Bahá'ís in neighbouring countries to move there to assist in this process. Romania had early successes; the first local Spiritual Assembly in eastern Europe since the Second World War was elected on 21 March 1990 in Cluj.

In terms of national bodies, after the first two NSAs were formed the British Isles and Germany/Austria in 1923, there were no other new NSAs until a joint one for Italy and Switzerland was elected in 1953. By the end of the Ten Year Crusade in 1963, another 14 were established (France in 1958; Austria in 1959; Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland in 1962). No further national Bahá'í institutions were formed until the NSAs of Iceland and Republic of Ireland were established in 1972, followed by Greece in 1977, Cyprus in 1978, and the Canary Islands in 1984. In central and Eastern Europe, national bodies were established for Romania (1991); Czechoslovakia (1991); Russia, Georgia, and Armenia (1992); Albania (1992); the Baltic States (1992); Bulgaria (1992); Hungary (1992); Poland (1992); Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova (1992); and Slovenia and Croatia (1994). Armenia, Georgia, and Belarus all elected separate NSAs in 1995, Sicily in 1995, Moldova in 1996, and separate NSAs for the Czech and Slovak Republics were formed in 1998. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania elected separate NSAs in 1999, and Croatia in 2021.

The number of local Spiritual Assemblies (LSAs) provide a clearer perspective on the growth of the Bahá'í community in the second half of the twentieth century. In absolute numbers, this has changed considerably over short time periods, partly as a consequence of meeting the deadlines of international plans set by the Universal House of Justice, which was often accompanied by Bahá'ís moving into new areas so that there were nine adult Bahá'ís resident to elect an LSA. In 1945, there were 6 LSAs in Europe (Smith 2004: 20). In 1963, there were 172 LSAs with largest numbers of 48 in the British Isles (excl. British Guyana), 30 in Germany, 12 in Italy, and 12 in Switzerland. This had increased to 180 LSAs by 1968 (with 8 in Austria, 6 in Belgium, 54 in the British Isles, 1 in Eire, 3 in Denmark, 4 in Finland,

6 in France, 29 in Germany, 15 in Italy, 3 in Luxembourg, 9 in the Netherlands, 4 in Norway, 7 in Portugal, 15 in Spain, 4 in Sweden, and 8 in Switzerland) (Universal House of Justice 1968). Over the next decade, this increased more than three-fold. In 1979, there was a large increase to 637 LSAs. This further grew to 687 LSAs by 1986, and again in 1992 to 845 (Universal House of Justice 1993), a rise mostly explained by new Bahá'í communities of Central and Eastern Europe (which had 112 LSAs in 1992 or 13% of the total) (Bahá'í World 1998: 222-223). This gradual increase was sustained in the 1990s with 832 LSAs in 1993, 1,041 in 1996 (Universal House of Justice 1997) and 958 in 1998 (Bahá'í World 1999). The last update from annual Bahá'í yearbooks was 2003–2004 when 860 LSAs were reported in Europe, with an inflection point around 1997–98, when LSA numbers started to decline (Figure). Although European-wide LSA numbers has not been published in official sources since this time, they have continued to decline. Based on available national community reports, it can be estimated that there are around 600 LSAs in 2020. Some of this reduction will have been due to LSAs merging in some areas to align more closely with civil boundaries.

Since the late 1990s, there has been a focus on a range of grassroots community activities, including children classes, junior youth activities, study circles and devotional meetings. There are few documented sources on the number of these activities—an official one reported 570 study circles in 2001, which increased to 1,665 in 2006 (Baha'i World Centre 2007: 10). A recent summary of these has reported that there have been 3,346 educational activities with 13,572 attendees, and 4,011 devotional meetings with 19,062 in attendance (Universal House of Justice 2020). These provide a complementary approach to consider growth of Bahá'í communities in Europe.

One example of this change in direction is in junior youth activities, which have been one focus of Bahá'í community life, which involves a wider community of those interested in Bahá'í principles. The following official summary is an example of this from the Canary Islands and indicative of a process throughout the continent and Bahá'í world:

Young people in the Jinámar neighbourhood of the Gran Canaria cluster, Canary Islands, were invited to youth gatherings where they creatively explored the themes of service and friendship.... To channel their energies into treading a path of service, the institute team launched an intensive institute campaign, in which some 30 youth participated. Through the courses, the youth deepened their understanding of how service and worship could remain at the centre of their lives. During their time together, they organized a service activity in the neighbourhood and planned to invite their friends to join them in the conversation... Institutions of society, particularly the local government, began to acknowledge the contributions of the Bahá'í community to the well-being of the neighbourhood by asking the friends to participate in meetings to identify and respond to the needs of the neighbourhood (Baha'i World Centre 2017: 33-34).

These grassroots activities can be interconnected with junior youth, which in turn lead to children's classes and are strengthened by the devotional meetings that families and others are invited to attend. As described in Madrid, Spain:

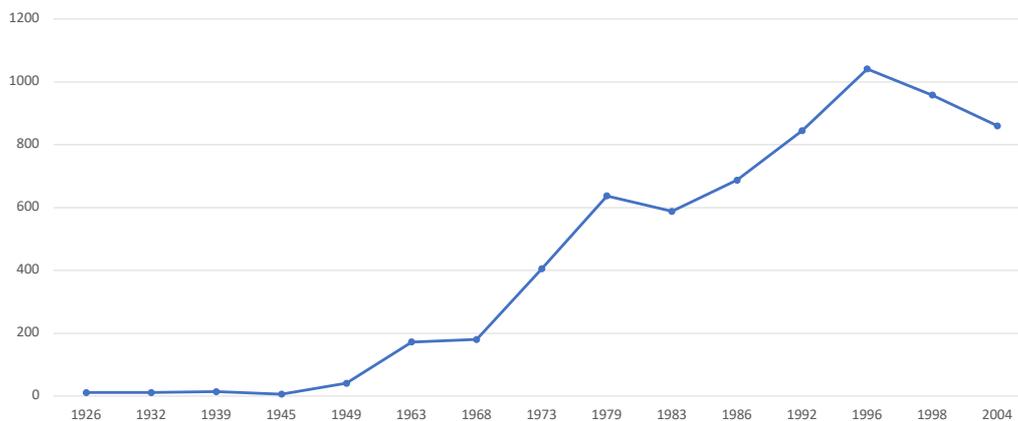
whenever a junior youth group was formed, a children's class would also be established in the same area. The two activities came to mutually reinforce each other... The devotional character of the cluster was strengthened as the groups initiated devotional meetings for their families and developed the habit of praying together. In neighbourhoods where there was a concentration of junior youth groups, the heightened level of activity opened the doors for collaboration with like-minded organizations in the wider society, including schools..." (Baha'i World Centre 2017: 22).

These activities have been complemented by activities designed to participate in current societal discourses, and initiatives have been reported to contribute to prevention of radicalization (Bahá'í World News Service 2019), improving governance (Bahá'í World News Service 2016), and a wider set of issues related to social transformation (Bahá'í World

News Service 2018). The Brussels Office of Bahá'í International Community engages with European political institutions on these issues.

Figure: Number of Local Spiritual Assemblies in Europe based on official sources

European LSAs numbers



In terms of numbers of individual Bahá'ís, Peter Smith has produced estimates based on information from the Bahá'í World Centre. In 1963, there were 4,900 Bahá'ís in Europe, which increased to 8,900 in 1968. In 1973, this rose to 17,200, and 19,800 in 1978. In 1983, it was 20,700, and 24,500 in 1988 (Smith 2004: 33). The highest proportionate growth was between 1963 and 1973. Warburg estimated that there were 40,000 European Bahá'ís in 2001, which increased to 50,000 in 2015 (Warburg 2015). Other sources, such as the World Christian Encyclopedia, provide alternative estimates of Bahá'í numbers, which are overestimates of membership as they focus on a looser definition of adherence but provide an overview of the number of countries where there is an active Bahá'í presence. In 2020, this source, now known as the World Christian Database, estimated 166,000 Bahá'ís in Europe

(including Russia) (Johnson and Zurlo 2020). However, based on examining individual countries with more validated sources of information (such as annual reports of national Bahá'í communities), this is around 3–6 times too high for membership numbers. For example, the UK NSA reports around 8,000 Bahá'í members in 2020, whereas the World Christian Database estimated it at 45,000 adherents, more than 5-fold higher.

Individual countries

Turning now to individual countries, the most recent overview was from 1998 when Iceland had the highest number of LSAs per million population (34) followed by Luxembourg (27), Cyprus (8), and Ireland (6) (Fazel and Hassall 1998: 38; Smith 2004: 36). The countries with the smallest Bahá'í presences, excluding the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, were Italy (1.1 LSAs per million), France (0.6), and Greece (0.6). In 2019–20, using national Bahá'í community annual reports, there were 5 LSAs in Iceland (14 LSAs per million population), 11 in Luxembourg (18/million), 18 in Ireland (3.6), 16 in Norway (3.0), 47 in Italy (excluding Sicily) (0.8), 6 in Greece (0.6), and approximately 30 in France (0.4). This suggests reductions in LSAs per million population for Iceland, Ireland, Italy, and possibly France.

In absolute numbers, in 1998, the two largest European Bahá'í communities were reportedly Albania (13,000 Bahá'ís) and Romania (7,000). Countries with the most Bahá'ís per million population were Albania (4,029), Iceland (1,345), Luxembourg (983), Portugal (605), Cyprus (529), Romania (308), Ireland (175) and Norway (173). This contrasts with considerably smaller communities in France (24), Italy (32), and Spain (44) (Warburg 1995: 184–85). In 1992, Albania reported 3,000–4,000 Bahá'ís (or 940–1250/million), and

Romania 1,000 (or 44/million) (Bahá'í World 1998). In 2014, Margit Warburg outlined Bahá'í populations per million for Iceland (1,118 per million), Norway (238), Finland (142), Sweden (113), and Denmark (67) (Warburg 2015). In 2019–20, the rates were similar: Norway (207), Finland (138), Sweden (106) and Denmark (69).

By comparison, Bahá'í numbers in 2019–20 show declines in some Eastern European countries over the last decade, including in Albania and Romania. Iceland reports around 350 Bahá'ís or 950 Bahá'ís per million population (NSA of the Bahá'ís of Iceland 2020) and Ireland around 550–600 Bahá'ís (or 120 per million), both of which are declines compared with the 1998 membership numbers in absolute terms and per head of population. Reliable numbers are available in some national annual reports, some of which provide information on net growth, and need to consider births, deaths, net migration, enrolments and withdrawals.

The two largest European Bahá'í communities, the UK and Germany, illustrate the difficulties in examining trends over time. The problem of whether and how to count unknown addresses is demonstrated in the UK—the number increased from 574 in 2014 to 1,914 in 2018 (with no change in the numbers with known addresses). In 2020, in the UK, there were an estimated 6,149 Bahá'ís with known addresses and another 1,818 without such addresses; around 120 Bahá'ís/million population. Trends in UK numbers demonstrate minimal annual net growth of 0.5% (including births and immigration) over the last few years with new conversions having decreased from around 100 to around 50–70 per year, and small annual increases in overall membership partly due to net immigration.

In Germany, there were around 5,835 Bahá'ís in 2020 or around 69 per million population. German Bahá'í numbers increased from 4,404 in 2000 to 5,835 in 2017, around 4% annual growth, but around two-thirds of all new enrolments were recent Iranian migrants.

Without these recent Iranian migrants, over 2012–2017, there were around 59 new enrolments per year and 28 withdrawals (i.e. net of an additional 31 Bahá'ís per year). There were 106 LSAs in 2005 in Germany (1.3 LSAs/million) (Bahá'í World News Service 2005), which decreased to 90 in 2020 (1.1 LSAs/million).

Some observations can be made on Bahá'í numerical trends over time. First, three countries with large populations—France, Germany, and the UK—had their Bahá'í communities start at similar times and were bolstered by the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Before the second world war, Germany seemed to have advanced considerably faster than the UK and France in terms of the growth of local assemblies and groups, and in the range of their Bahá'í activities (e.g. having a children's magazine and two other national periodicals). Since 1945, though, the UK has become the leading Western European Bahá'í country numerically, and it continues to have more LSAs and Bahá'ís in absolute terms and per head of population. Despite Paris's early status as the leading centre in Europe, France took 35 years longer than the British Isles and Germany/Austria to form its first National Spiritual Assembly, which it did in 1958, and continues to have fewer LSAs per million population than other countries (including half that of Italy).

Second, smaller countries, particularly islands, have relatively large Bahá'í communities. This is partly a reflection of international Bahá'í plans which prioritized establishing a presence in every country, which led to Bahá'ís moving to many smaller countries to establish communities there. Other possible explanations include a particular country's openness to religious diversity and alternative forms of religious expression. Across the Nordic countries, this might be part of the explanation of the 10-fold difference between Iceland and Denmark or Sweden.

Third, there appears to be no straightforward north/south or Protestant/Catholic explanation for differences in Bahá'í numbers between European countries. One example of this is a comparison between Portugal with a Bahá'í population at 605 Bahá'ís/million and 2.4 LSAs/million and Greece with around 10–20 Bahá'ís/million and 0.6 LSAs/million—both of which are southern European countries. Another is that of Ireland, a Catholic country, with considerably more Bahá'ís and LSAs per head of population, compared to Italy. Peter Smith has argued that smaller countries may be more liable to 'endogenous' factors such as pioneers (Bahá'ís immigrating from other more established communities), and local initiatives while larger countries will be influenced by secular trends (Smith 1984: 90).

Fourth, many of the early Bahá'í communities in Western Europe were established by American or Western European women who had become Bahá'ís in the US. Fifth, a large impetus to the development of these communities came from many Iranian Bahá'ís moving to mainland Europe as part of the Ten Year Crusade. This continued with economic migration of Iranians to western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and then after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 when the arrival of refugees bolstered Bahá'í communities in many countries. This means that many of these communities have large proportions of Iranian expatriates and their children; in many countries this proportion is around half. Finally, growth in these communities since the 1970s has been small, and in many countries, there has been little to no growth for the last few decades. There have been very few examples of large numbers of conversions anywhere in Europe that have been sustained, with the possible exception of the early 1970s in the UK and Ireland.

Notable European Bahá'ís

Among the better known Bahá'ís include the British potter Bernard Leach, the environmentalist Richard St Barbe-Baker, poet and playwright Alice Buckton (Osborn 2014a) and athlete Nelson Elvora, the 2008 gold-winning Olympic triple jumper. Queen Marie of Romania, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, came to hear about the religion through Martha Root, an American Bahá'í teacher, when she visited Romania in 1923. She wrote letters expressing her acceptance of Bahá'í beliefs towards the end of her life, although her biographies make little to no mention of her Bahá'í affiliation. August-Henri Forel, a Swiss etymologist and neuroanatomist, and whose image was on a Swiss banknote from 1968 to 2000, became a Bahá'í in 1920 when he was in his early 70s.

Themes in European Bahá'í community life

Europe has a large diversity of religious and cultural traditions, and this is reflected in wide variations in many aspects of Bahá'í community life. One notable feature of the Bahá'í community in Europe has been its contribution to Bahá'í literature and scholarship. In the UK, Hasan Balyuzi wrote a series of biographies of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith that remain important sources on its early history (Momen 1995: xi–xx). John Ferraby, who with Balyuzi and Townshend was appointed a Hand of the Cause in the British Isles, wrote a scholarly introductory book in 1957, *All Things Made New*. George Townshend, who was based in County Galway and later in Dublin, Ireland, and former archdeacon in the Anglican Church of Ireland, assisted Shoghi Effendi with translations of Bahá'í texts and wrote introductory books and works on the Bahá'í religion's relationship with Christianity and Islam. In 1947, Townshend renounced his Anglican orders and explained his reasons in a

pamphlet, *The Old Churches and the New World Faith*, that was distributed to more than 10,000 ‘religious and other leaders of public opinion’ (Braun 1978: 83). From the 1970s, a small number of British Bahá’ís drew on academic methods, convened regular conferences (Smith 1979, 1980) and seminars,³ and published a series of books, monographs, and journal papers. Two periodicals, *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin* (1982–2000) and *Bahá’í Studies Review* (1998–current) were regular outlets for presentations from these seminars (Fazel 2018). In Germany, scholarship was centred around the work of Udo Schaefer, who wrote introductory works and systematic surveys of Bahá’í ethics. A comprehensive and scholarly apologetic work, *Desinformation Als Methode* (published in English as *Making the Crooked Straight*) co-authored by Schaefer, is the only book to have been highlighted in the annual message to the Bahá’í world from the Universal House of Justice, describing it as a ‘signal victory for the German Bahá’í community’ (Universal House of Justice 2000). Aspects of it were discussed in a special issue of *World Order* magazine, the Bahá’í periodical (*World Order* 2004). In Italy, Alessandro Bausani, who was a distinguished academic of Iranian studies and Islam, made contributions to Bahá’í scholarship. Periodicals were published in Italy (*Opinione Bahá’í*)⁴ from 1977 and France (*Pensee Bahá’íe*) from the 1970s.

A second feature of the European Bahá’í community has been in its public relations work. This has raised awareness of the persecution of Iran’s Bahá’ís, which remains the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, and lobbied governments and international organizations to call for the Iranian government to cease this persecution. The Bahá’í International Community office in Geneva continues to raise awareness of the plight of Iran’s Bahá’ís, and national communities have brought the matter to the attention of their respective

governments and European institutions. The persecution of other Bahá'í communities, including those in Egypt and Yemen, has been a focus of recent efforts.

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¹ The Bahá'í Faith is not strictly pacifist, but the Nazis may have perceived Bahá'ís to be pacifist or too pacifist for citizenship.

² Contrary to Smith, there may have been a Bahá'í presence in Albania after the war, as members of Refo Capari's family maintained a Bahá'í self-identity. Refo Capari became a Bahá'í in the US in 1931, returned to Albania later that year, and is considered the first Albanian Bahá'í.

³ An outline is provided by Stephen Lambden on <https://hurgalya.ucmerced.edu/node/499> (accessed 23 October 2020). There were academic seminars at the University of Cambridge 1978–1979, University of Lancaster 1980, Universities of Warwick and Newcastle 1983, and from 1985, the seminar moved to Newcastle where it was held biannually until 2008 (mostly at the Bahá'í centre), when it became an annual meeting. In 2016, the seminar moved to University of Oxford (as the Newcastle Bahá'í centre was disposed of by the UK NSA).

⁴ Apart from Bausani, notable papers include those by Hossein Avaregan in Apr-Jun/Jul-Sept/Oct-Dec 1981 'Profezie con valore scientifico I–III' [Scientifically-sound prophecies]; Apr-Jun 1987 'Sul valore scientifico delle profezie; considerazioni di uno studioso' [The scientific character of prophecies: personal scholarly reflections]; and Jan-Mar 1990 'Punti razionali comuni fra Corano e Vangelo' [Common rational themes between the Quran and the Gospel]. See <https://bahai-library.com/author/Hossein+Avaregan>.