

The Protestant Sorbs (Wends)

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The Sorbs (Wends) are the smallest Slavonic nation. They are descendants of the Slavonic tribes who around 600 AD, during the migration of peoples, settled in the territory between the Rivers Oder/Neiße and Elbe/Saale, and between the Baltic Sea and the East German secondary mountain chains. These tribes were not able to establish state structures of their own. Their territories became part of the Roman Empire during the High Middle Ages. For hundreds of years the Sorbs have lived under German statehood. There is no "Mother State" beyond the German borders.

Sorbian territory has been shrinking for about 1,000 years. As the Industrial Age began, the remainder of the Sorbian territory in Lusatia began to break up. The growing domination of the German language and culture in all spheres of life, often aided by the suppression of all Sorbian activities in the church, schools, and in public life, led to the loss of the language and the culture of the Sorbs. They became a minority in their own country. Only a small area populated by Catholic Sorbs has managed to survive as a result of being a kind of "religious island" and because of its extended agricultural structure. Here, the Sorbian language and culture have been preserved into the 21st Century. At the end of the 19th Century there were approximately 160,000 Sorbs. Today they number about 30,000.

The terms "Wends" or "Sorbs" are, generally speaking, interchangeable. For centuries the term "Wends" was widely used. The term "Sorbs" is derived from the Sorbian word "Serbja" and became the official term after World War II. In Lower Lusatia the term "Lower Sorbs/Wends" is preferred.

The Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian languages are of Slavonic origin and in them quite a number of Old Slavonic characteristics are found. In Lower Lusatia, in the southern parts of Brandenburg, the people speak Lower Sorbian, which is quite closely related to Polish. In Saxony, in Upper Lusatia, the people speak Upper Sorbian, a language quite similar to Czech. There are some regional dialects along the border line in the Hoyerswerda and Weißwasser areas.

With the Reformation the Sorbian people became Protestant, though some communities near Kamenz and Bautzen remained Catholic. The mother-tongue principle of Luther led to the development of the Lower Sorbian and Upper Sorbian literary languages. As early as 1548 Luther's version of the New Testament was translated into Lower Sorbian, but remained in manuscript. It was followed by Luther's catechism, which was printed first in Lower Lusatian in 1574 and later in 1595 in Upper Sorbian. By educating and training priests as well as teachers, the Sorbian people for the first time acquired an intellectual leadership.

The Church history of the Protestant Sorbs was influenced by two essential and interregional movements: (1) in the mid-18th Century by the development of the "Brüdergemeine" ("Moravian Brethren") of Baron Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf at Herrnhut, and (2) in the mid-19th Century by the separatist movement of Old Lutherans in Prussia. Today's "Brüdergemeine" at Kleinwelka, founded in 1751 as a Sorbian colony, and certain parishes in Upper and Lower Lusatia belonging to the independent Protestant-Lutheran church are evidence of this process. They left the united state church as independent Lutheran parishes in the 1840s.

Emigration affected the Protestant Sorbs from the 1850s till the end of the 19th Century. The US and Australia were the main countries of interest, followed by Canada, South Africa, and South America. The largest group of emigrants was that which in 1855 founded the town of Serbin in Texas. Here, the settlers most clearly showed their intention to preserve Protestant Sorbian traditions. Here, and in Australia, you can still find societies and parishes today that keep alive the cultural and religious heritage of their ancestors.

The cultural development of the Sorbian people was, until the end of the 19th Century, mainly in the hands of the Protestant educated class. The birth of Sorbian middle-class culture was more or less the fruit of their work. The achievements of the Sorbian people in the arts, in culture, and in the sciences can scarcely be paralleled among other nations of comparable size. Owing to the intensified assimilation process among the Protestant Sorbs, the intellectual leadership of the Sorbian people was taken over in the 20th Century by the Catholics.

The Bible and hymn-books have existed in both Sorbian languages since the 18th Century. The New Testament was first published in Lower Sorbian in 1709, the Old Testament in 1796, and the complete Bible in 1824 and 1868. The first Lower Sorbian hymn-book appeared in 1574, the latest in 1915. An Upper Sorbian version of the New Testament came out in 1706, followed by the whole Bible in 1728. The latest of its eleven editions appeared in 1905. The Upper Sorbian hymn-book of 1710 appeared in its most recent edition in 1955. At present, new editions of hymn-books in both languages are being prepared. Since 1854, there has also been an Upper Sorbian edition of the Lutheran confessions.

"Pomhaj Bóh" and "Pomagaj Bog" are journals published for the Sorbian Protestants and named after the Protestant greeting (in German: "Gott helfe dir"; English equivalent: "God speed"). Founded in 1891, the Upper Sorbian "Pomhaj Bóh" is an independent monthly, whereas "Pomagaj Bog", first published in 1988, is a part of the Lower Sorbian weekly newspaper.

The national costumes of the Sorbian people are of an astonishing variety and beauty. They are still worn today in the regions of Hoyerswerda, Weißwasser (Central Lusatia) and Cottbus (Lower Lusatia) by women of the older generation. The younger generation wear them for special occasions and festivals. More and more "Costume Societies" have been founded in recent years.

Sorbian customs are widely followed in all regions of Lusatia. Among them are the winter and spring customs of "Birds' Wedding", the "Wendish Carnival", "Witch Burning", "Felling the May Pole", and "Mid-Summer Day's Riding". Around harvest-time there are "Plucking the Cock", "Beating the Cock", "Stubble Riding", and "Moving the Frog on a Wheelbarrow." Important church festivals are sometimes combined with special customs. At Christmas, there is the Žišetko (Child of God) and at Easter there are Easter Fires, girls fetch "Easter water," eggs are decorated and Easter hymns are sung in the night. Often you can also see the colourful national costumes.