

Kosovo: Destruction and Reconstruction

From the spring of 1998 until the summer of 1999, Kosovo was the scene of armed conflict and savage 'ethnic cleansing'. Thousands of the region's Kosovar Albanian inhabitants were killed and nearly a million were driven from their homes. Less well known than the human tragedy is the fate of Kosovo's rich cultural heritage - its churches, mosques, monasteries, and other religious monuments, traditional residential architecture, well-preserved historic urban centres, libraries, archives, museums and other cultural and educational institutions.

During the war, there had been disturbing reports from official and professional sources in Yugoslavia, suggesting that major damage had been inflicted on historic monuments in Kosovo by NATO's aerial bombardment. Among the monuments and sites reported to have been destroyed or seriously damaged by the air strikes were: the Gracanica monastery near Prishtina; the Decani monastery; the Pec Patriarchate complex; the Church of the Virgin at Ljeviška and the Sinan Pasha Mosque in Prizren; the Prizren League Museum; the Hadum Mosque complex in Gjakova (Serbian: Djakovica); the historic bazaars in Gjakova and Pec (Albanian.: Peja); and two old Ottoman bridges, Ura e Terzive (Terzijski most) and Ura e Tabakeve (Tabacki most), near Gjakova.



These allegations were given wide publicity in the news media, in professional forums (including the US/ICOMOS Newsletter), and in two white books issued by the Yugoslav government. On 1 June 1999, Yugoslavia's ambassador to UNESCO announced that the old parts of the Kosovo city of Prizren and the provincial capital Prishtina had been completely destroyed by NATO bombing. Meanwhile, eyewitness accounts by Kosovar refugees also spoke of cultural destruction. In a survey of Kosovar refugee heads of households in camps in Albania and Macedonia, carried out in April-May 1999 by the NGO Physicians for Human Rights, nearly half (47 percent) of the respondents reported seeing mosques destroyed by Serb forces before they left Kosovo.

Following the end of hostilities in June 1999, it was evident that there was an urgent need to assess what had happened to cultural heritage in Kosovo during the war. However, amidst the human drama of the post-war return of refugees, the discoveries of mass graves and other evidence of atrocities, and the urgency of providing shelter before the onset of winter, the fate of heritage was not foremost among the concerns of the international organizations active in Kosovo. In response, we formed the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Project. Our first task was to carry out a post-war field survey in Kosovo; supported by a grant from the Packard Humanities Institute, we spent three weeks in Kosovo in October 1999

Among the goals of the survey was to gather evidence to assist the investigations of the UN Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The deliberate destruction of cultural property, in the absence of overriding military necessity, is a serious violation of international law and those responsible for ordering and carrying out such attacks can be prosecuted for war crimes.

Another aim of the survey was to provide a basis for planning the post-war restoration of heritage sites by identifying monuments in need of immediate conservation and assisting in the formulation of reconstruction projects. We also sought to identify qualified individuals, institutions, and local initiatives on the ground in Kosovo that would benefit from outside support. Documentation assembled by the survey has already been used to launch the first projects for the protection and reconstruction of war-damaged historical architecture in Kosovo since the end of the war.

We made it our goal to ascertain, insofar as possible, the condition of all cultural and religious monuments and institutions, whether listed or not, that were reported to have been damaged. Covering both wartime and post-war destruction, the survey was primarily a damage assessment.

Our survey database has 268 entries for architectural monuments. We found that out of the four well-preserved historic urban centres in Kosovo, three old towns – Pec, Gjakova, Vushtrri (Serbian: Vucitrn) – had suffered severe devastation. Allegations by the Yugoslav authorities notwithstanding, it was evident both from the nature of the damage we saw and from the statements of eyewitnesses we interviewed that this destruction was not the result of aerial bombardment.



The historic city of Prizren survived the war without significant damage to any of its monuments, except for the Museum of the 1878 Albanian League of Prizren, which was burned down on March 28, 1999, by Serbian police using rifle-propelled grenades. Prishtina, Kosovo's capital city, had already lost much of its historic core to Tito-era urban renewal decades ago, but has a number of major monuments, which survived the war intact as did most of the rest of the city. War damage in the capital was largely limited to a handful of modern government buildings, including the Serbian police headquarters and the post and telecommunications centre, which were hit by NATO air strikes; one 16th-century neighborhood mosque and a number of Albanian houses and shops had been burned by Serbian forces during the war.

Other allegations of NATO bombing damage to cultural monuments in Kosovo also proved to be unfounded. We found the two historic bridges near Gjakova, alleged to have suffered direct hits, were completely intact. The destruction of the old urban centres was clearly the result of arson, with signs that historic structures associated with the culture and religion of Kosovo's Albanian majority population had been singled out for attack while nearby modern concrete apartment buildings stood untouched.

In the small towns and villages of the countryside, traditional residential architecture was also a major target in the recent conflict. Ottoman-era town houses (*konak*, *shtëpia*) of prominent Albanian families, and the stone tower-residences (*kulla*) that are indigenous to this area of the Balkans and typical of Albanian traditional architecture, had clearly been singled out for destruction by Serbian forces during the 'ethnic cleansing' campaigns of the summer of 1998 and the spring of 1999. Out of some 500 *kullas* in Kosovo, built mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries and inhabited by generations of the same families, barely 10 per cent are estimated to have survived the war intact.

Another category of historical architecture in urgent need of protection in Kosovo is Muslim houses

of worship. This part of Europe is home to an indigenous Islamic tradition going back more than 600 years, with its own rich architectural heritage - mosques, tekkes (lodges of the Sufi lay brotherhoods), medreses (theological schools), Islamic libraries, hamams (Turkish baths), and bazaars built to support charitable foundations. This heritage suffered massive destruction during the recent conflict. In the majority of cases, it was evident from the statements of eyewitnesses, from the type of damage, and from visible signs of vandalism that this destruction was not the result of military activities. These were not buildings that had been caught in the crossfire as Serbian forces fought Albanian rebels, or hit by NATO's bombs and missiles.



According to statistics published before the war, there were 607 mosques in Kosovo as of 1993. Of these, 528 were congregational mosques (xhamia) of which 498 were in active use, and 79 smaller mosques (mesxhid) of which 70 were in active use; the majority dated from Ottoman times. More than 200 of these mosques - a third of all Islamic houses of worship in Kosovo - were destroyed or damaged during the recent conflict, according to our survey and documentation we examined in the offices of the Islamic Community. Now some of these mosques are being rebuilt, often with the assistance of Islamic charities from abroad which are pushing their own narrow, sectarian agendas, with little consideration given to historic preservation or indigenous traditions. Dr Rexhep Boja, the president of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, is not happy about this state of affairs. He told us the Islamic Community would welcome the assistance of international organizations concerned with heritage protection in restoring mosques that are of importance as historic monuments, or as examples of traditional village mosque architecture.

Although much concern was expressed during the NATO bombing campaign about the fate of Kosovo's medieval Orthodox churches and monasteries, in fact we found no evidence that any Orthodox sites had suffered serious damage during the war - either from NATO bombs or at the hands of Albanians. After the end of the war, however, the situation with respect to Serbian Orthodox heritage changed for the worse. Although international peacekeeping forces were

deployed swiftly to guard the famous medieval churches and monasteries, many less well-known churches in rural areas abandoned by the fleeing ethnic Serb minority became easy targets for revenge attacks by returning Albanian villagers in the immediate aftermath of the war. Most of the Serb village churches that have been vandalized or destroyed are of relatively recent vintage, built or 'rebuilt on ancient foundations' (obnovljena) in the 20th century; 25 of them were churches built in the 1980s and 1990s. About a dozen, however, were genuinely medieval structures and listed monuments.

Providing security for such sites is a matter for the UN peacekeeping force in Kosovo, which somewhat belatedly realized the need to protect all Orthodox churches, not just the ones listed in the encyclopaedias and guidebooks. In response to increased vigilance the number of attacks on churches has dropped significantly.

(Text shortened)

Photos: TR, Flickr

By Andrew Herscher & Andras Riedlmayer

Date: 2009-06-29

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-kosovo-destruction-and-reconstruction-article899>