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Architectural Heritage in Kosovo: A Post-War Report
By Andrew Herscher and Andras Riedlmayer

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: the Gračanica monastery near Prishtina; the Decani monastery; the Pec Patriarchate complex; the Church of the Virgin Ljeviska 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); the Roman Catholic church of St. Anthony in Gjakova; and two old Ottoman bridges, Ura e Terzive (Terzijski most) and Ura e Tabakeve (Tabacki most), near Gjakova. These allegations were given wide publicity on Internet websites, in the news media, in professional forums (including the US/ICOMOS Newsletter), and in two white books issued by the Yugoslav government.[1] On June 1, 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.[2]

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.[3]

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 documenting damage to cultural and religious heritage.

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. According to the Tribunal's statute, these include the "seizure of, destruction, or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity, and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments, and works of art and science." [4]

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 in 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.

The survey was not focused solely on listed monuments, due in part to our commitment to document war crimes against cultural property. While the 1954 Hague Convention requires that protected monuments be designated and marked as such, the 1977 Protocols I and II Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 use a more inclusive wording, which is also reflected in the ICTY's statute. Furthermore, it was evident that the criteria employed in listing monuments for protection by the Serbian authorities before the war had been conditioned to a considerable extent by ideological considerations. [5]

Thus, 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. Limitations on our time and resources and the difficulties of access to some sites prevented us from making a more detailed study of each monument.

Our survey database has 268 entries for architectural monuments, representing sites we visited during our fieldwork in October 1999 or for which we have obtained photographs and other documentation from local institutions and individuals that had carried out their own efforts to document the destruction of cultural heritage. [6] Those sources, including the Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo, the Presidency of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (KBI), and the Serbian Orthodox Eparchy of Raska and Prizren, have additional documentation in their files. [The Department of Culture in the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo \(UNMIK\)](#), established in April 2000 is now working with the Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo to prepare a more detailed survey of monuments and sites in Kosovo that are in need of protection and restoration.

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-c. neighborhood mosque and a number of Albanian houses and shops were burned by Serbian forces during the war.

Other allegations of NATO bombing damage to cultural monuments in Kosovo also proved to be unfounded. In Gjakova, for example, we found the two Ottoman-era bridges, both alleged to have suffered direct hits, to be completely intact. The Roman Catholic church of St. Anthony had been taken over by soldiers from the nearby Yugoslav army base, who evicted the Albanian priests and the nuns from the church and convent "half an hour before the war (i.e. the NATO bombing) began," according to the parish priest, Fr. Ambroz Ukaj. The church and the convent were used as a military command centre for the next two months, while the army base was flattened by NATO's air strikes. The only damage to the church, other than windows broken by air blast, was that caused by Yugoslav soldiers who thoroughly looted and vandalized the premises before they left in early June 1999. The destruction of the old urban centres was also clearly the result of arson rather than aerial bombardment, with signs that historic structures associated with the culture and religion of Kosovo's Albanian majority population had been singled out for attack while adjacent 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*, *shtepia*) 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 Serb forces during the "ethnic cleansing" campaigns of the summer of 1998 and the spring of 1999. Of some 500 *kullas* in Kosovo, most built during the 18th-19th c. and inhabited by generations of the same families, barely 10 per cent are estimated to have survived the war intact.

As was also the case in Bosnia after the war, international reconstruction agencies in Kosovo, with their focus on triage, rapid reconstruction and the use of standardized building materials, are in effect forcing the rapid, wholesale abandonment of the traditional housing stock---including buildings that were still inhabited and considered desirable by the locals until they were destroyed just a year or so ago. Without urgent intervention to stabilize and help rebuild these threatened *kullas*, a traditional architectural type unique to this region of Europe is threatened with extinction.[7]

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 (mosques burned out from within, with no bullet or shrapnel holes; minarets that had been blown up with explosives placed inside, causing the stone spire to collapse onto the building), and from visible signs of vandalism (Koran manuscripts ripped from bindings and burned or defaced with human excrement, crude anti-Muslim and anti-

Albanian graffiti in Serbian on the walls of destroyed and desecrated mosques) 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.[8] 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 pursuing their own sectarian agendas, with little consideration given to historic preservation or indigenous traditions.[9] 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 last spring's 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 Albanian rebels. 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 Serbian Orthodox 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 constructed in the 1980s and 1990s. About a dozen, however, were genuinely medieval structures and listed monuments.[10] Providing security for such sites is a matter for the UN peacekeeping force in Kosovo (KFOR), which somewhat belatedly last summer realized the need to protect all Orthodox churches, not just the ones listed in the encyclopaedias and guidebooks. In response to increased vigilance on the part of KFOR and appeals by Kosovar Albanian civic and religious leaders, the number of attacks on churches has dropped significantly (a total of eleven incidents resulting in damage have been reported since last October; nine of these were repeat attacks on abandoned sites already damaged last summer). It seems, however, that this protection has not included any effort to consolidate damaged structures or shield them from the elements.

There is also an urgent need to provide the local professionals and authorities in Kosovo with up-to-date information and training on matters concerning heritage protection and planning. Although it has been claimed that the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has contributed to the crisis of heritage protection and reconstruction by rejecting collaboration with Serbian institutions concerned with cultural heritage, this argument is misleading.[11] According to the terms of its mandate from the United Nations, from June 1999 on UNMIK assumed full legal

responsibility for the civil administration of Kosovo and is barred from having direct dealings with the official Yugoslav state agencies. As we were informed by the UNESCO representative in Kosovo, Serbian professionals have been encouraged to work with the UN Administration in their private capacity, but none have chosen to do so. The Belgrade government, in turn, has branded Serbs who choose to cooperate with UNMIK as traitors. It should also be kept in mind that even before the war cultural heritage and its protection in Kosovo had become not merely a professional but also a profoundly politicized matter, and the state agencies charged with heritage protection were carrying out the regime's political agenda as well as exercising their professional mandate.

During the decade preceding the war (1989-1999), Kosovo was effectively cut off from access to international professional literature and contacts, while Kosovar Albanians were excluded from the universities and most were unable to practice their professions. At present, while there are many bright, talented and well-motivated people in local institutions who have an interest in heritage preservation, many of them lack adequate training and even trained professionals lack recent experience and need to update their skills. The Faculty of Architecture in Prishtina needs both basic tools---current professional books and journals, computers and software, etc.---and also visiting faculty and lecturers who could help to bring the curriculum up to current international standards and introduce new methods and approaches to conservation.

The international community has spent a good deal of money over the past year on sending expert consultants to Kosovo for short-term "needs assessment" visits, but there has been a shortage of any serious funding devoted to actual, practical projects. In October 2000, the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Project[12] and the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Prishtina are co-hosting an international workshop on the post-war reconstruction of Kosovo's damaged architectural heritage. This workshop is bringing architects involved with the reconstruction of historic buildings and urban centres elsewhere in the Balkans together with architects and students of architecture from the Faculty in Prishtina. In the workshop, pilot reconstruction projects will be developed for three war-damaged historical structures and these projects will then be realized with funding from the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Project, supported by a grant from the Packard Humanities Institute. However, as cultural heritage currently ranks near the bottom of the priorities for international reconstruction assistance in Kosovo, much work remains to be done.

FOOTNOTES

[1] "War Damage in the Balkans," *US/ICOMOS Newsletter*, no. 2 (March-April 1999), pp. 1-3; allegations that NATO air attacks were deliberately targeting cultural and religious heritage were given wide publicity on the internet on websites sponsored by the [Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia](#): "Cultural Heritage in Yugoslavia Endangered by NATO and KLA"; the [Ministry of Information of the Republic of Serbia](#): "A Large Number of Cultural Monuments in Serbia Damaged"; the [Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#): "Bombing of Cultural Monuments" which site is also archived [here](#); and the [Serbian Orthodox Church](#): "Bombing of Serbian Shrines," also found in the [Web Archive here](#). Unsubstantiated allegations from Serbian sources continued to be reproduced uncritically by some international specialists even after the end of the war: [Nikos Axarlis, Spencer P.M. Harrington, Andrew L. Slayman, "Kosovo War Damage," *Archaeology* vol. 52 no. 4 \(July/August 1999\)](#); [James Wiseman, "Legacy of Medieval Serbia," *Archaeology*, vol. 52 no. 5 \(September/October 1999\)](#). See also: *NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia: Documentary Evidence, I: 24 March-24 April 1999* (Belgrade: Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1999), pp. 226-228; *NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia: Documentary Evidence*,

II: 25 April-10 June 1999 (Belgrade: Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1999), pp.310-317.

[2] Statement by Yugoslav ambassador to UNESCO Nada Popovic Perisic quoted in "Yugoslavia Appeals for UNESCO Aid to Restore War-damaged Monuments," Agence France-Presse, June 1, 1999.

[3] Physicians for Human Rights, *War Crimes in Kosovo: A Population-Based Assessment of Human Rights Violations against Kosovar Albanians* (Boston: Physicians for Human Rights, 1999), p. 86.

[4] See the [Tribunal's web page](#) for its statute and its May 1999 indictment of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and other top Yugoslav and Serbian officials, which specifies among the charges "the destruction of non-Serbian residential areas and cultural and religious sites."

[5] By the time of last year's war, some 210 Serbian Orthodox monuments (churches, monasteries, cemeteries) in Kosovo had been granted listed status, including 40 churches built between the 1930s and the 1990s. In contrast, only 15 of the more than 600 mosques in Kosovo were listed as historic monuments, even though more than half of these mosques date from the Ottoman era (14th-19th c.). See *Cultural Heritage of Kosovo and Metohija*, ed. Mileta Milic (Belgrade: Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the Republic of Serbia, 1999).

[6] The survey database will be mounted on Archnet, a new on-line resource on architecture, urban design, planning and restoration now being developed at the MIT School of Architecture and Planning. Click [here](#) for a sample of our survey's documentation on the destruction of historical architecture in Kosovo (click on - "sample images from the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey").

[7] The Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo has prepared an exhibition on the destruction of kullas in Kosovo; a selection of photographs from the exhibit can be viewed on the [website of UNMIK's Department of Culture](#).

[8] Pre-war statistics on Kosovo mosques published in *Dituria Islame*, no. 49 (May 1993). The Presidency of the Islamic Community of Kosovo recently published an illustrated volume documenting the destruction of 218 mosques during the 1998-99 conflict, entitled *Barbara Serbe ndaj monumenteve Islame ne Kosove* [*Serbian Barbarities against Islamic Monuments in Kosova*] (Prishtina: Kryesia e Bashkesise Islame te Kosoves, 2000).

[9] [Jolyon Naegele, "Saudi Wahhabi Aid Workers Bulldoze Balkan Monuments" RFE/RL Weekly Magazine \(August 4, 2000\)](#). For a recent update by UNMIK's Department of Culture, see ["The Restoration of the Hadum Mosque Complex in Gjakova: A Cautionary Tale."](#)

[10] The Orthodox Eparchy of Raska and Prizren has issued an illustrated catalogue listing 75 churches attacked after the war, about 40 of them seriously damaged or destroyed: *Crucified Kosovo: Destroyed and Desecrated Serbian Orthodox Churches in Kosovo and Metohia* (1999-2000). An [on-line edition](#) is available.

[11] See "More on Serbian Heritage in Kosovo," *US/ICOMOS Newsletter*, no. 3 (May-June 2000), p. 6, which cites allegations made by Prof. Slobodan Curcic in the latest issue of the *Bulletin of British Byzantine Studies*.

[12] On the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Project and its reconstruction initiatives in Kosovo, see [The Friends of Bosnia Press Release, 27 June 2000](#) and The Friends of Bosnia Action Alert and [The Friends of Bosnia Announcement, 20 December 1999](#).

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