DESTROYING BUILDINGS, DESTROYING CULTURE
ARCHITECTURE AND THE CIA-BICP ARCHIVE

Emily Spiwak, CISTP Student Research Intern

Abstract
Religious and cultural artifacts served as a visually dominant reminder of Bosnia’s past of peaceful coexistence between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (CIA, 2013, 1992-08-19). The religious and cultural monuments which were destroyed spoke to an intermingled public life – prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Islamic minarets, Catholic campaniles, and Orthodox steeples often rose from a single, united skyline (Riedlmayer 2002). By erasing the material evidence of a group’s history, nationalist aggressors were able to project their distorted vision of a “pure” society into the future. This deliberate targeting of cultural icons typically occurred in the absence of military necessity, constituting war crimes (CIA, 2013, 1995-10-01; Baumel, 1993).

Social Memory
A social or collective memory is easily manipulated and often exploited by those in power in order to legitimize a cause. Serb leaders such as Slobodan Milošević heightened nationalist tensions by rallying their cause around the historic Battle of Kosovo, sanctifying the region as the Serb fatherland – thereby validating Serb territorial claims (CIA, 2013, 1994-11-29). A major accusation by Serbs against Albanian Muslims in Kosovo was that they had “defiled our graves” and “burned our monasteries.” Group narratives tend to dictate the deeply held fears and perceived threats to identity that often drive ethnic conflicts (CIA, 2013, 1992-08-19). In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, this resulted in the unprecedented assault on cultural monuments (Kirk & Thatcher, 2005; Bikmen 2007).

Significance of Architecture and Evidence of Targeting
Culturally significant architecture has the ability to reinforce social identity, record history, and unite communities. It is, therefore, natural prey for those wishing to incapacitate any such possibility of unison (Sells, 2002). Evidence shows that vibrantly diverse cities were violently transformed into homogenous societies, with “support systems for ethnic cultures” – schools, churches, theaters, museums, and libraries – being wantonly targeted and destroyed. In the city of Mostar, for example, one Muslim official estimated that 90% of the city’s historic and cultural buildings, including cathedrals and mosques, were damaged or destroyed (CIA, 2013, 1992-08-19). Ultimately, hundreds of Catholic and Orthodox churches and more than 1,000 mosques throughout Bosnia were tragically damaged and destroyed. This defacement was often carried out when no warfare was taking place, with surrounding buildings left unharmed – indicating that the sole purpose of these demolition efforts were to erase unwanted reminders of a group’s existence and prevent that group’s return (Riedlmayer 2002; CIA, 1993-08-19; Baumel, 1993).

Implications
The ongoing process of reconstruction has been long and costly (CIA, 2013, 1995-08-21). Many foreign donors, including those from Arab countries, have offered aid in rebuilding Bosnian mosques (CIA, 2013, 1995-10-01). Saudi Arabia has emerged as a major contributor to Bosnian Muslim reconstruction efforts, alarming the country’s Catholic and Orthodox communities. Saudi Wahhabism is much more conservative than local traditions, and is often associated with Islamic extremism (Schwartz 2002). Furthermore, many of these “reconstruction” projects involve the demolition of Ottoman mosques which managed to survive the war, in favor of minimalist style mosques which ignore regional aesthetics (Riedlmayer 2002).

References

Contact Information: Emily Spiwak, spiwakej@gmail.com