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Research Article

Kosovo's cultural heritage and the 1998–1999 war: The search for justice

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Abstract

This study examines the destruction of Kosovo's cultural heritage during the 1998–1999 war and the response of international organizations during the post-war transition. It considers how these organizations documented damage and supported heritage protection, and how Kosovar residents understood their losses and expressed their demands for justice. The analysis draws on field observations, conversations with residents, and published studies. It documents damage to religious buildings, libraries, and archives, as well as the loss of museum objects and family heirlooms. The study identifies post-war efforts to record the damage and develop heritage protection legislation, alongside unresolved demands for accountability and the return of displaced cultural objects. Residents' accounts show how the loss of family photographs, traditional clothing, and other inherited possessions affected both family memory and collective identity. The study concludes that protecting Kosovo's cultural heritage after the war also requires preserving these testimonies and addressing residents' continuing demands for justice.

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Serbian diplomats, clergy, and scholars promoted accounts of Kosovo that denied the presence of Albanians and their historical ties to the region. These efforts extended to denying and destroying traces of their cultural heritage (Mehmeti & Shkodra, 2023, pp. 124–125). After the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire and Serbia's occupation of Kosovo in 1912, Serbian national policy made extensive use of Kosovo's cultural heritage, as it did in many other spheres (Elsie & Destani, 2019, p. 3; Gjoshaj, 2014; Popovic, 2006, pp. 372–373; Schmitt, 2021, p. 49).

In 1914, Turkish and Serbian diplomats reached an agreement in Istanbul concerning the oversight of the Tomb of Sultan Murad near Prishtina as a cultural monument. The author interprets the formal agreement over the monument as an early indication of Serbia's claim to historical rights over Kosovo (Shkodra, 2017, pp. 71–72). The agreement is also displayed at the Tomb of Sultan Murad in the village of Mazgit near Prishtina.

The author argues that these anti-Albanian policies continued for a century and contributed to successive conflicts, culminating in the war of 1998–1999. In the author's account, the war brought international recognition of Kosovo Albanians' claim to the independence and statehood they had long been denied and prompted NATO's military intervention against Serbian targets. Kosovo's cultural heritage suffered extensive damage throughout this period, with particularly severe losses during the war (Schmitt, 2012, p. 261). The author identifies advance planning by the Serbian government as a defining feature of the destruction. Violence and destruction spread through towns and villages across

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Kosovo. Herscher (2010) explains that, after Contact Group diplomats concluded that negotiations with Serbia had been ineffective, the group's leaders authorized NATO to bomb Serbia to compel the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo. NATO officials presented the campaign as a means of ending atrocities, violence, and human suffering in Kosovo.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to examine how the 1998–1999 war affected Kosovo's cultural heritage and how international organisations responded to these losses during the war and the post-war transition. It focuses on efforts to document damage, protect cultural heritage, and secure the return of cultural objects taken from Kosovo. It also explores how Kosovar residents remember these losses and what they expect from domestic and international institutions in their pursuit of justice.

Method

This qualitative study draws on the author's field observations, conversations with Kosovar residents, and published sources, including post-war damage surveys. The surveys and relevant literature were used to examine damage to cultural sites and collections and to trace institutional responses. Residents' accounts were examined alongside these sources to understand how the loss of homes, family heirlooms, and other cultural objects affected family memory and shaped demands for accountability and restitution.

Findings

The author argues that international judicial proceedings did not adequately address responsibility for the destruction of Kosovo's cultural heritage. In the author's assessment, international actors tended to downplay crimes committed by Serbian forces and present the parties' actions as equivalent. After 1999, many international officials began to use the term "conflict" in place of "war." This choice sparked debate and dissatisfaction among Kosovo Albanians, who saw it as serving the interests of international actors and, above all, those of Serbia.

The author also considers that the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and other organizations that arrived after the war did little to draw attention to damage caused by Serbian forces, even though international authorities administered Kosovo's justice system at the time.

One constructive step taken by UNMIK was to repeal Serbian laws considered discriminatory and begin drafting new legislation for Kosovo, including legislation on cultural heritage (Jerliu, 2016, p. 97; Schmitt, 2012, pp. 266–267). Riedlmayer (2007, p. 124), who investigated the destruction of cultural heritage in Kosovo, reports that UNESCO had no plan to document the damage.

Cultural heritage is often among the first casualties of war, particularly when religious monuments are targeted (Drançolli, n.d.; Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001, p. 5). In Kosovo, Catholic churches, mosques, prayer halls, tombs, Sufi lodges, and religious records associated with Albanian communities were burned or destroyed across the country. The author interprets this destruction as part of a broader pattern of violence and cultural repression by the Serbian state apparatus (Bajgora, 2013, p. 7). The Serbian jurist Serđa Popović argued that democracy had yet to take hold in Serbia despite frequent references to it in public discourse. He described the governing party as populist, patriarchal, and authoritarian, supported by the academy, the military, and the church (Popović, 2022, p. 17).

At the time of writing, 24 years after the war and 15 years after Kosovo declared independence, the author noted that the Serbian government had yet to apologize for the crimes and damage. In conversations with the author, residents expressed dissatisfaction with the international bodies that had worked in Kosovo for years. They felt that these bodies had given too little attention to holding the Serbian state accountable. The residents linked their experience to the destruction and suffering caused by Serbian military and police forces in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. In the author's account, the losses of 1998–1999 were felt by Albanians both within and beyond Kosovo.

Cultural heritage sites and objects in Kosovo were subjected to destruction, looting, and theft. Hausler (2018) discusses the destruction of cultural heritage in relation to both international humanitarian law and human rights. As

David Lowenthal argues, heritage is something people inherit whether they want it or not, and its uncomfortable aspects are part of that inheritance (as cited in Jezernik, 2013, p. 135).

Heritage scholars have described the deliberate destruction of cultural sites as a means of exercising power and control over vulnerable populations (Apaydin, 2020, p. 20). In Kosovo, the losses included bazaars, libraries, archives, buildings, monuments, homes, and artefacts that had been passed down through generations (Drançolli, 2017; Lelaj, 2020; Mehmeti & Shkodra, 2023; Riedlmayer, 2007). When Serbian forces expelled Kosovo Albanians from their homes in 1999, families left behind heirlooms and other valuables they had preserved over generations. Serbian soldiers and police officers looted these possessions. Their loss dealt a severe blow to families because the objects had both material value and a place in their inherited cultural heritage (Schmitt, 2012, p. 261).



Photo 1. Bazaar Mosque in Vushtrri

Serbian paramilitaries burned the mosque and 26 shops in the old bazaar on 26 March 1999. Two days later, the ruins were levelled and the site was cleared using heavy machinery. Photograph from Bajgora (2013).



Photo 2. Sheikh Fejzullah's Sufi lodge in Mitrovicë

The lodge and its library were destroyed in the spring of 1999, and the ruins were bulldozed. Photograph from Bajgora (2013).

The destruction of cultural heritage is a loss for the local community and for society more broadly. Apaydin (2020, p. 25) argues that heritage is often targeted early in an effort to erase a group's presence and identity and prevent it from creating new forms of heritage and collective memory.

Several international agreements address the protection of cultural heritage. The 1954 Hague Convention concerns the protection of cultural property during armed conflict. Article 1(a) identifies movable and immovable property of

great importance to a people's cultural heritage, including secular and religious monuments, archaeological sites, groups of buildings of historical or artistic interest, works of art, manuscripts, books, and significant collections (Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954, art. 1(a); Milligan, 2008, p. 93).

Other instruments include the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. The author situates the removal and looting of Kosovo's museum holdings between 1912 and 1999 within this broader discussion of heritage protection and restitution. At the time of writing, many objects from Kosovo remained on display in museums in Serbia.

András Riedlmayer, an American scholar who collected primary material during fieldwork, testified in The Hague about cultural heritage destruction during the wars in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. His evidence was brought before the court in proceedings involving Serbian presidents Slobodan Milošević and Milan Milutinović (Riedlmayer, 2007, p. 126; Vukpalaj, 2021, pp. 112–113). Milošević died before his trial concluded, and Milutinović was acquitted.

Riedlmayer and Herscher began documenting the condition of Kosovo's cultural heritage soon after NATO forces entered Kosovo in 1999. Their post-war survey challenged Serbian government claims that NATO bombing had struck the Deçan Monastery, the Patriarchate of Pejë, the Graçanicë Monastery, the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviša, the Sinan Pasha Mosque and the League of Prizren Museum in Prizren, the Hadum Mosque, the bazaar and St Anthony's Catholic Church in Gjakovë, and the historic Terzive and Tabakve bridges. Their findings indicated that some of these sites had escaped damage and that other sites had been destroyed by Serbian police and military forces (Bevan, 2023, p. 114; Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001, p. 5). The author reports that his own fieldwork corroborated these findings.

After the war, some Albanian individuals damaged Orthodox churches and properties associated with Kosovo's Serb community in acts of retaliation (Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001; Schwartz, 2021). Drawing on field observations and conversations with residents, the author places these attacks in the context of accounts of intimidation, mistreatment, humiliation, imprisonment, rape, and killings attributed to the Serbian state apparatus during the war and over the preceding century (Popović, 2022, p. 58). The author distinguishes the post-war attacks from the destruction under Milošević on the basis of their scale and the presence of international personnel throughout Kosovo.

In 1999, ethnological and archaeological objects were taken from the Kosovo Museum, the Regional Museum of Prizren, and the Museum of Mitrovicë and transferred to Serbia. The author describes these transfers as having no legal basis. Records documenting nearly five decades of work by the Kosovo Institute for the Protection of Monuments were also removed. Officials from the Republic of Kosovo sought the return of the museum objects. At the time of writing, those efforts had been unsuccessful (Drançolli, 2015, p. 215; Shukriu, 2011, p. 11).



Photo 3. Traditional clothing featured on a 2002 postcard

The postcard shows one of the best-known objects in the Kosovo Museum's ethnological collection, which the author reports was taken by the Serbian government during the 1999 war. The postcard called for its return alongside 1,245 other objects reported to have been removed.



Photo 4. Kosovo Museum exhibition calling for the return of objects taken to Serbia Photograph by Isa Vatovci, 2022.

Residents who spoke with the author shared their experiences of the war, including the destruction of homes and torture by Serbian police and military forces. One resident, identified as Sh. I., recalled:

> When the house burned, it was my mother's bridal chest we missed most. It held a complete set of traditional clothing made by my grandmother, many other valuable things, and family photographs we can never replace.

Another account describes the experience of returning home after displacement:

> After Kosovo was liberated in June 1999, we came back from Albania. We had been refugees, driven out by the Serbian police. As soon as we reached the entrance to our yard, we saw that nothing had survived. Serbian forces had burned and destroyed everything. We were devastated, but people turn out to be stronger than stone. We started our lives over. We slept in a garage for years until we could repair the house enough to live in it.

For further documentation of wartime crimes and displacement, see *Krimet gjenocidale etnike në Kosovë* (2000).

These first-hand accounts give younger generations a basis for discussing events they did not experience themselves. Laws can help ensure that cultural heritage is recognized, respected, and preserved for future generations. Establishing what happened and bringing those responsible to justice also requires commitment from professionals and institutions (Shkodra, 2018, p. 229). Healing takes time, and the author argues that it also requires acknowledging the suffering caused by successive Serbian governments.

Discussion and Conclusion

The wartime destruction of Kosovo's cultural heritage affected both public institutions and private households. Damage to religious buildings, libraries, and archives disrupted places and collections through which communities preserved their history (Bajgora, 2013; Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001; Riedlmayer, 2007). Residents' accounts show how that loss was experienced within families. A bridal chest containing traditional clothing and family photographs, for example, held memories that could not be recovered by rebuilding the house. This testimony gives a concrete example of the connection between cultural objects, memory, and identity discussed by Apaydin (2020).

The post-war response addressed different aspects of heritage protection. Field surveys documented damage and challenged claims about its causes, while the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo initiated work on new heritage legislation (Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001; Jerliu, 2016). These efforts established a record of losses and laid the groundwork for legal protection. Residents nevertheless continued to ask who would be held accountable and when cultural objects taken to Serbia would be returned (Drançolli, 2015; Shukriu, 2011). The Kosovo Museum's campaign for the return of its collections illustrates how a cultural institution can keep these demands visible.

The study's contribution to research on Kosovo's culture lies in reading residents' accounts alongside damage surveys and institutional records. Together, these sources show what was lost, why it mattered to residents, and what they expected from domestic and international institutions. The testimonies provide insight into those experiences, while the evidence supports a fuller assessment of individual institutions' responses only where their actions are documented. Preserving these accounts alongside records of damaged sites and displaced collections would help future generations understand the losses and give museums and other institutions a basis for pursuing restitution.

Biodata of Author



Valon Shkodra was born in Prishtina on 13 April 1984. He studied ethnology at the University of Prishtina and spent a year as a master's exchange student in European Ethnology at the University of Turku in 2010, supported by an Erasmus Mundus scholarship. He pursued postgraduate studies at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Art Studies in Tirana and took part in the International Visitor Leadership Program in the United States in 2012. In July 2022, he completed a PhD on cultural heritage in Kosovo at the University of Ljubljana.Shkodra worked at the Ethnological Museum of Prishtina from 2006 to 2016. He joined the Department of Ethnology at the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina in 2017 and is now a scientific associate. He served as editorial secretary of *Gjurmime Albanologjike – Folklor dhe Etnologji* from 2019 to 2022 and joined its editorial board in 2023. He has served on the editorial board of the *Journal of Kosovo Music and Culture* since 2024. In 2024, he taught Protection of Cultural Heritage at Pjetër Budi College. Since 2025, he has taught Anthropology and Ethnography of Kosovo as an adjunct lecturer at RIT Kosovo.His publications include *The Ethnological Museum of Prishtina and Its Function* (2019), *Prishtina's Traditional Handicrafts* (2021), *Traditional Handicrafts of Kosovo*, *The Cultural Heritage of Kosovo in Postcards* (2023), *Folklore and Ethnology in Gjurmime Albanologjike: Bibliography, 1971–2023* (2024), and *The Museums of Kosovo: Guides to Our Identity* (2025). Email: vshkodra@hotmail.com ORCID: 0009-0001-6753-4627

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