Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage

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This chapter will focus on the intentional destruction of cultural and religious property during the 1992–5 Bosnian War and the ethnic cleansing that drove it. It examines not only how international actors proved unable (or unwilling) to stop the destruction, but after the war had ended failed to situate post-conflict restoration and reconstruction of cultural heritage within the framework of justice and human rights for the victims of the conflict – despite the clear aims of the Dayton Peace Agreement in this respect. It explores, as well, the powerful link between cultural heritage and identity, and the significance that restoration of their destroyed heritage came to hold for the victims of ethnic cleansing.

The background to destruction

An understanding of the backdrop to the destruction of cultural property in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war of the early 1990s requires first a brief outline of the trajectory and ideologies behind the conflict. The 1992–5 Bosnian War was by far the most violent of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession that accompanied the dissolution of the federal state of Yugoslavia into its constituent republics as the majority became independent states. The move towards independence grew out of a variety of reasons, but became particularly acute following the rise of Slobodan Milošević and the so-called Greater Serbia Project (Ramet 2006) with its trend towards ethno-religious nationalism and ethnic exclusivism. By the time open warfare broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina in spring 1992, Slovenia and Croatia had already proclaimed their independence. Neighbouring Croatia, home to a large Serb minority, had been under attack for over
a year by the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) and Serbian paramilitary units, and almost one-third of its territory (along Bosnia-Herzegovina’s western border) was under the control of the breakaway Serb para-state of Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK). Scores of historic structures were attacked during the Croatian conflict, but the most notorious episode of intentional cultural heritage destruction was the JNA bombardment of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Dubrovnik.

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was to prove even more devastating. It was a conflict that galvanised intense public polemic and had a far-reaching and long-lasting impact that continues to influence policy-makers today. One of the defining (and most reported) features of the war was the extensive intentional destruction of cultural and religious property (particularly its Ottoman and Islamic heritage), both as symbols of ethno-religious affiliation and of a historically diverse Bosnian identity. It was the greatest destruction of cultural heritage in Europe since the Second World War and aroused global condemnation, from the United Nations and UNESCO to the person on the street in London, New York, Istanbul, Cairo and Kuala Lumpur. While the National Library (Vijećnica) in Sarajevo and the Old Bridge (Stari Most) at Mostar became iconic in international perceptions of the attacks on cultural heritage, the hundreds of devastated and demolished mosques were potent symbols across the Islamic world.

Unlike Slovenia and Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina was a demographic patchwork of three principal ethno-national groups: Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats and the ambitions of Serbia under Milošević and Croatia, under the leadership of Franjo Tudman, towards its territory were plain to see. Following a republic-wide referendum, Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia in March 1992; in May 1992 it became a member state of the United Nations.

The conflict initially pitted Bosnian Serb separatist forces against the legally elected, internationally-recognised government of Bosnia-Herzegovina (labelled by many commentators, however, as ‘Muslim’). Secessionist Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić, established a breakaway para-state of Republika Srpska and, aided by the JNA and Serbian and Montenegrin paramilitary units which moved into Bosnia from Serbia, began a systematic and aggressive programme of ethnic cleansing of non-Serb populations (targeting both Muslims and Croats) aimed at creating a contiguous, mono-ethnic territory that was exclusively Serb in character. By autumn 1992 Bosnian Serb forces controlled over 70 per cent of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s territory.
During these campaigns of ethnic cleansing countless atrocities and human rights abuses considered war crimes and breaches of international humanitarian law took place, including the destruction of the religious and cultural symbols of the expelled populations. At the same time, the three and a half-year siege of Bosnia’s capital Sarajevo began, by first JNA, then by Bosnian Serb forces under the command of Ratko Mladić. It was during the early months of the siege in August 1992 that the National Library was bombarded and set alight with incendiary shells.

A ‘war within a war’ followed in January 1993, when Bosnian Croat forces (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane/HVO), propelled by the Vance-Owen Plan that proposed the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina into ethnically dominated cantons, turned on their Bosnian government allies in a move to gain territory for an ethnically homogenous Croat para-state of Herceg-Bosna, a move that received substantial support from Croatia and the Croatian Army. During this conflict scores of towns and villages were ethnically cleansed of their non-Croat inhabitants and their cultural and religious property destroyed, Mostar was devastated and the Old Bridge destroyed by HVO shelling in November 1993. This conflict ended with the Washington Agreement of March 1994 and the creation of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the so-called Muslim-Croat Federation).

Although no serious analyst considers the Bosnian War a religious or ethnic war (but rather the outcome of a political project), perceptions of ethno-national and ethno-religious differences and the near and distant past, particularly the events of the Second World War and the period when Bosnia-Herzegovina formed part of the Ottoman Empire, were certainly mobilised by those driving the conflict. From early on, the systematic and deliberate nature of the destruction of cultural and religious heritage (usually far from the frontlines), as well as the reasons behind it, were clearly understood by observers and victims alike, reasons that were often overtly articulated by the perpetrators themselves (Walasek 2015, 55). The purposeful destruction of built structures that functioned as markers of ethno-religious identity aimed at obliterating the material evidence of a group’s long-term roots in a locality, transforming a once visibly diverse cultural landscape into an apparently historically mono-ethnic domain.

The greatest part of the destruction was carried out as an integral part of the aggressive campaigns of ethnic cleansing waged by secessionist Bosnian Serb, and later, Bosnian Croat forces and their allies, in their attempts to create contiguous mono-ethnic territories. Thus the destruction of the tangible symbols of the long historic presence of the groups
targeted for removal (most often Bosnia’s Muslims) should not be seen in isolation, but rather as going hand in hand with multiple atrocities and human rights abuses. The destruction was rarely collateral. The vast majority of attacks on cultural and religious property were premeditated, systematic and took place far from the frontlines. Elsewhere, in cities like Sarajevo and Mostar, not so easily overrun, structures with no ethno-national affiliation, but which embodied Bosnia-Herzegovina’s centuries-long diversity were targeted, including museums, archives, libraries and institutions like Sarajevo’s Oriental Institute. For this was not only an attempt to violently eradicate particular ethno-religious groups, but an attempt to deny that a collective pan-Bosnian identity had ever existed.

The types of built heritage destroyed or badly damaged were overwhelmingly religious and overwhelmingly Ottoman, or associated with Muslims or Islam. Thus in Banja Luka, de facto capital of the separatist Bosnian Serb leadership, where there were no military operations at any time, 15 mosques (12 of them listed national monuments before the war), including the sixteenth-century domed Ferhadija Mosque, along with other important Islamic or Ottoman structures, like the city’s ancient clock tower, were intentionally blown up over the course of 1993. Elsewhere, small towns such as Foća and Stolac were devastated (by Bosnian Serb forces and their allies and by Bosnian Croat forces respectively) by the well-organised demolition of their historic Ottoman cores. All their mosques (and in the case of Stolac, its Orthodox churches) were systematically destroyed, as were entire Muslim neighbourhoods, and their Muslim inhabitants forcibly driven out, imprisoned, tortured, raped or killed. While there were deliberate attacks on, and destruction of, the Catholic/Croat and Orthodox/Serb heritage, such as for instance, the demolition of the Austro-Hungarian era Catholic church in Nevesinje and the Franciscan monastery at Plehan and the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral (Saborna Crkva) in Mostar and the monastery at Žitomislić, this was on a far lesser scale than on those structures associated with Muslims, Islam or the Ottomans.

In rural settings or urban fringes, destroyed structures were typically left to crumble. But in town and village centres, now controlled by the perpetrators and supporters of ethnic cleansing, there was active intervention: the remains of mosques such as the Ferhadija and the domed sixteenth-century Aladža Mosque in Foća (regarded by many as the most beautiful mosque in South-East Europe), were razed to the ground, their remnants trucked to landfill sites or thrown into rivers and reservoirs. Municipal authorities removed mosques from their urban plans.
The levelled sites of what had once been sacred structures went on to be used as car parks and locations for communal rubbish containers, or left as empty, rubbish-strewn spaces. In a few cases rubble from destroyed mosques was used to cover Muslim victims buried in mass grave sites, such as the case of the Savska Mosque at Brčko, whose remains were discovered by war crimes investigators while excavating a mass grave near the town.

The particular targeting of minarets and their removal from the landscape was noted by one expert observer as ‘... a kind of architectural equivalent to the removal of the population, and visible proof that the Muslims had left’ (Kaiser 2002). By the end of the war, with one exception, not a single intact minaret was left standing on territories occupied by Bosnian Serb forces. These were the first steps in the creation of a mono-ethnic realm with a fictitious past, where in 1993 the mayor of Bosnian Serb-held Zvornik could tell journalists visiting the once Muslim-majority town: ‘There were never any mosques in Zvornik’.

It should be emphasised, however, that this was not an equivalent and mutual destruction by all three principal warring parties in the conflict (as it is sometimes still portrayed). Rather, investigations and analysis have compellingly demonstrated that the greatest part of the deliberate destruction of religious and cultural property took place during campaigns of ethnic cleansing, the principal perpetrators of which were Bosnian Serb forces and their allies, followed by Bosnian Croat secessionists. While Bosnian government forces did breach the Geneva Conventions, it had no policies of ethnic cleansing and did not engage in such operations (Walasek 2015, 58).

**International responses to the destruction**

As the destruction continued, the ineffectiveness of international legal instruments for protecting cultural heritage in times of conflict – such as The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954 – became all too evident. Such important monuments as the Ferhadija Mosque and the Old Bridge were not destroyed until 1993, more than a year after the war had begun. Yet despite the presence of a large multinational United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian aid presence across Bosnia-Herzegovina (UNPROFOR, UNHCR, ICRC, etc.), backed by a string of United Nations Resolutions condemning ethnic cleansing, the international community seemed unable to prevent such acts.
The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) was to be the sole international organisation to take any form of early action, sending consultant experts to assess the destruction and publish their findings in ten *Information Reports on War Damage to the Cultural Heritage in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (COE 1993–1997). PACE hoped these reports would inform the international community of the scale of the destruction, encourage efforts to stop it and promote active intervention to protect the heritage in what the first report in early 1993 called ‘cultural cleansing’ and ‘a cultural catastrophe in the heart of Europe’.

From the start the PACE reports raised what remains an aspiration even 25 years later: the importance of integrating support for the cultural heritage into traditional humanitarian aid and the importance of emergency assistance before the conflict ended. The Council of Europe parliamentarians in 1993 urged international actors to beware of hiding behind ‘false reasons’ for not intervening at an early stage, nor to feel ashamed of being concerned for the cultural heritage while people were suffering, pointing out the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of the destruction.

Yet while international humanitarian law clearly mandates protection of a people’s cultural property, being seen to privilege responding to violence towards buildings over violence towards people was problematic for most international organisations, even those concerned entirely with heritage protection, and remains so. Preserving historic monuments or supporting museums and heritage organisations, if considered at all by the aid community, was regarded as of minor importance in the face of what they believed were more pressing humanitarian problems – and this is still the case. Combined with an unwillingness to provide emergency assistance to protect the built heritage while the conflict was ongoing (usually on the grounds that it might be attacked again), this ensured that almost no assistance was given to protect Bosnia-Herzegovina’s cultural heritage during the war.

Bosnia, then, became the paradigm of intentional cultural property destruction, not only among heritage professionals, but across disciplines from the military to humanitarian aid organisations in the years following the end of the war as they struggled to find answers to the questions raised by the all too obvious inability of the international community, in all its varied embodiments, to prevent the horrors of ethnic cleansing and the accompanying destruction of cultural and religious property, and where its representatives were frequently left as passive onlookers.
There was, however, one international institution which did aim to find justice for victims of the Bosnian War to which the international community gave its (sometimes grudging) support. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was created under a United Nations Security Council Resolution in 1993 (Res. 827 (1993)), with a mandate to call to account those who committed or allowed war crimes and human rights abuses to take place. The ICTY has played a seminal role in the development of international human rights law – including that relating to cultural heritage – and has demonstrated how closely protection of cultural and religious property is tied to peoples’ rights to enjoyment of their cultural heritage, and how intimately cultural heritage and identity are linked (Brammertz et al. 2016).

The inclusion of crimes against cultural and religious property in the ICTY’s Statute was an important addition to international legal instruments. But the Tribunal’s most distinctive contribution to the prosecution of crimes against cultural heritage has been its landmark indictments and judgements which, in case after case, established that the deliberate destruction of structures which symbolised a group’s identity were a manifestation of persecution and a crime against humanity.

Yet since the ICTY’s mandate ended in 2017, the limitations of international justice for prosecuting crimes against cultural property during conflict have become apparent. There were virtually no prosecutions or convictions, apart from the bombardment of Dubrovnik, for the destruction of historic monuments as a crime in itself. Most guilty verdicts for the destruction of cultural property came from linking the destruction to persecution, and thus focused principally on religious structures. No-one has been prosecuted for the destruction of cultural property at the historic city of Jajce during the war. Nor has the ICTY satisfactorily explained why the mosques intentionally destroyed in Banja Luka (including the Ferhadija), and the shelling of the Sarajevo’s National Library, all of which appeared in its 1995 indictment of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, were removed from final indictments. Most shocking of all, the 2013 guilty verdicts for the destruction of the Old Bridge at Mostar on the defendants in the Prlić et al case were overturned on appeal in November 2017, raising once again the question of what constitutes military necessity (ICTY, Prlić et al. 2017).
Dayton, human rights and heritage

The signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) in December 1995 marked the end of the Bosnian War and Bosnia-Herzegovina’s formal division into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the so-called Muslim-Croat Federation) and Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. A huge international military and civilian presence, headed by a NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force (IFOR/SFOR) and the Office of the High Representative (OHR), oversaw implementation of the DPA. Billions of dollars in humanitarian aid poured into the country in an enormous reconstruction and state-building exercise.

An overarching aim of the Dayton Peace Agreement was to reverse the effects of ethnic cleansing in the hope of restoring Bosnia-Herzegovina’s pre-war diversity. Furthermore, to those drafting Dayton, addressing the devastation to Bosnia’s cultural heritage was considered so essential to the peace process that Annex 8 of the Agreement provided for the formation of a Commission to Preserve National Monuments. Two other Annexes of the DPA were also to have a crucial impact on reconstruction of the cultural heritage: Annex 6 on Human Rights, which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights and established a Human Rights Chamber (HRC), and Annex 7 on Refugees and Displaced Persons, which ensured the right of return for refugees and displaced persons to live in their pre-war homes.

As refugees and the displaced slowly began to return to the localities from which they had been ethnically cleansed, these Annexes of the DPA were increasingly invoked in the struggle to restore and rebuild. Restoration and preservation of Bosnia’s destroyed and damaged historic monuments, then, in theory, should have taken place within the framework of the Dayton Agreement, supporting the return of refugees and displaced people to the homes and communities from which they had been forcibly expelled.

Yet, with few exceptions, the international community’s involvement in heritage restoration in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the critical first post-conflict decade can be characterised by a narrow focus on a small number of high-profile projects, chief among them the World Bank-led, UNESCO-co-ordinated restoration of the Old Bridge and the historic core of Mostar. The iconic bridge came to be extensively mobilised as a visible symbol of the ideas of reconciliation and the reconstruction of relations between Bosnia’s ethno-national groups that the international community was keen to promote in the aftermath of the war, with the result that a substantial amount of the international funding available for
post-conflict heritage restoration was swallowed up by the many projects in Mostar.

There was no linkage of heritage restoration to the return process by international actors, and little discussion of justice or human rights for the survivors of ethnic cleansing, despite that the majority of historic structures in need of restoration were in those localities where ethnic cleansing had taken place. International support for restoration projects for war-damaged or destroyed historic structures in Republika Srpska, or locations in the Federation where there was opposition from hostile, ethno-national power structures, was non-existent as donors feared to become involved in what they perceived to be difficult and contentious settings.

Yet it was in just such settings that returnees focused on literally ‘restoring’ their communities – including the right to equality in the public space through the reconstruction of the built markers of their identity. This was often in the face of determined obstruction and violence from hardline nationalist local authorities and their followers, many of whom had been active participants in ethnic cleansing. For of all the varied domestic and international actors involved in post-conflict cultural property restoration in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the most significant were those communities who had been ethnically cleansed and were now dispersed throughout Bosnia, across the region and around the globe. Reconstruction of the destroyed markers of community identity became almost an imperative for returnees, closely bound up with restoring feelings of security and home. But, as we shall see, the absent could have as much agency in restoring communities as those who physically returned to the places from which they had been ethnically cleansed.

Sites of memory: a virtual Bosnia

A little explored phenomenon is the crucial role played by scores of town and village websites created by ethnically cleansed refugees and the internally displaced during and in the years after the war in constructing a virtual Bosnia which enabled globally-dispersed communities to maintain their cohesion. With internet usage becoming widespread just as war broke out, and as large swathes of Bosnia-Herzegovina were ethnically cleansed, these websites became quite literally sites of memory, heritage and identity, key mechanisms in recreating the localities from which communities had been expelled, keeping alive what had been lost through destruction and absence (Riedlmayer and Naron 2009; Walasek 2015, 230).
As the advocates of ethnic exclusivism began to rewrite the past, the pre-conflict histories of ethnically cleansed towns and villages were memorialised, documented and made accessible via such websites. Typically such sites included galleries of visual images (including pre-war photographs, old postcards and other illustrative material) of now-destroyed structures and townsapes, people and events from both the recent and more distant past, as well as information on history and heritage, often incorporating transcriptions of scholarly articles, newly written texts and such commonplace yet revealing documents of pre-war demographics as telephone directories posted on the exemplary (but now defunct) www.Focaci.org. It could be argued that through these websites, communities (particularly their younger members) gained far greater direct access to information about their history and heritage than they had before the war.

After the war, as parts of expelled communities began to return (or even before they began to return), these websites became channels for many ‘restorative’ and community-sustaining actions, including fundraising for rebuilding mosques and churches. The majority of these place-focused websites have now disappeared from the web, a huge loss of these almost unrecorded sites of community memory. But among those still functioning in 2018 is the more widely-based Bošnjaci.Net (www.bosnjaci.net). From 2006 Bošnjaci.Net promoted fundraising campaigns for rebuilding devastated and demolished mosques in Eastern Herzegovina (now in Republika Srpska), an area to which few Muslims had returned and where the situation for those who had was felt to be the worst in the country. In 2009 the campaign explicitly called on Bosniaks (Muslims) not to abandon their ‘cultural and religious traces in the region’ and urged them to be persistent in preserving their heritage and identity to ensure that the fate of the civilisation of Islamic Spain was not repeated (Bošnjaci.Net 2009).

Reconstruction as an imperative

An exploration of a handful of the initiatives to reconstruct cultural and religious property in Eastern Herzegovina that featured in the Bošnjaci.Net campaigns reveals the meanings these reconstructions came to hold, both for those who returned and those who did not, as well as for Bosnian Muslims/Bosniaks and the Islamic Community more widely. As has been discussed, the reconstruction of intentionally destroyed religious structures became almost an imperative for the returning ethnically cleansed,
an important part of re-establishing a sense of home and belonging. But such reconstructions could also be powerful acts of remembrance and bearing witness, a way of ensuring that the new histories being created by the ideologues and supporters of ethnic exclusivism were exposed.

In 2000 and 2001 the author of this article, with the archaeologist Richard Carlton, made two field trips to Bosnia-Herzegovina to carry out an independent assessment of the uneven, occasionally inaccurate and sometimes contradictory information available from the various published and unpublished sources then available (and in 2019 still not superseded) on the damage and destruction caused to the country’s cultural and religious heritage during and immediately after the 1992–5 Bosnian War.

A comprehensive survey would have been impossible in the short time available, but we hoped to visit, photograph and otherwise document sites (many in isolated rural locations) for which even at that time – more than five years after the end of the war – there was still no corroborated data. These trips proved, in fact, to be the first field survey of the breadth of destruction of the Islamic/Ottoman heritage across Republika Srpska and the photographic and other site records collected were given as evidence to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia/ICTY (Walasek 2015, 155).

In 2015 we decided to revisit many of the places in Eastern Herzegovina that we had recorded in 2000. It was now 20 years since the end of the war and 15 since our original survey. We aimed to see whether ethnically cleansed communities had indeed returned, and if their destroyed heritage had been reconstructed. These were all locations where there had been no military action, but which had been the scenes of the violent ethnic cleansing of their non-Serb (largely Muslim) populations. Among the localities we revisited were Gacko, Nevesinje, Plana and Skočigrm, all of which had figured in the the Bošnjaci.Net fundraising campaigns and which are focused on below.

Just as it is our duty not to forget Srebrenica, the holocaust of the Jews, it is our duty not to forget our demolished mosques.

(www.klix.ba 2014)

These were the words spoken by Enis Tanović, leader of the Islamic Community in the small town of Gacko, not far from Foča, on 7 May 2014, almost 19 years after the end of the Bosnian War, as he spoke to a gathering in front of Gacko’s recently reconstructed Mehmed-aga Zvizdić Mosque. Before the 1992–5 war the population of Gacko had been
almost evenly divided between Serbs and Muslims. But the little town and its wider municipality had seen the ethnic cleansing of its Muslim population in 1992. Now, over 20 years later, not a single Muslim had returned to live in the town, although a small number had returned to live in villages nearby.

The date of 7 May was the anniversary of the destruction of the Ferhadija Mosque in 1993, a date chosen by the Islamic Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina to be the ‘Day of the Mosque’, a time when Muslims were meant to reflect not only on the importance of the mosque in Islam, but on the destruction of mosques during the war. In Gacko, Enis Tanović had tenaciously led the local Islamic Community and its reconstruction efforts. But Gacko was no longer a place where Muslims could feel at home. Across the municipality six mosques had been destroyed, among them the central Mehmed-aga Zvizdić Mosque, which had been razed to the ground. Of the three which had been rebuilt since the end of the war, two had been attacked again in 2001 and 2008, long after the signing of the Dayton Agreement. Early returnees trying to reconstruct their homes often found them planted with landmines.

Even as Enis Tanović addressed the gathering outside the newly reconstructed mosque and the Mufti of Mostar, Seid Smajkić, impressed on listeners the importance of preserving their religious and cultural identity in their centuries-old homes, anti-Muslim songs could be heard coming from nearby cafes and many walls in the town carried prominent graffiti glorifying the indicted war criminals, Ratko Mladić and Vojislav Šešelj. Despite this, Tanović felt a compelling mission ‘to restore life in Gacko’, to restore a sense of ‘home’ for its returning Muslims, beginning with the reconstruction of the mosques and the restoration of place – which he saw as providing the essential foundation for those who came after him to build on (HadžiMuhamedović 2015, 90).

In Nevesinje, the local imam, Mehmed Čopelj, told us a similar story as he took us around the different religious sites. As in Gacko, there had been violent ethnic cleansing of Nevesinje’s non-Serb population, including the total destruction of all the town’s functioning mosques and its Catholic church – all in the absence of any military operations. Before the war Muslims had formed just over 15 per cent of Nevesinje’s population. Yet in 2015 not a single Muslim (including Čopelj himself) had returned to live in the town itself, mainly due to security fears, although they did live in villages nearby.

Nevertheless, the Islamic Community had restored two mosques in the town centre and the seventeenth-century Ljubović Mosque in nearby Odžak (where in fact no Muslims now lived). The Ćučkova Mosque,
which had not been in use before the war and had not been attacked, had been already restored as a functioning mosque and reconstruction of the main Careva Mosque was nearing completion. The Careva Mosque had been completely demolished and its remains (along with those of the Catholic church) dumped at a landfill site outside town.

The Islamic Community had also received permission to reconstruct a third mosque – the Dugalića Mosque. But, as Ef. Ćopelj asked, apart from the question of funding, so few Muslims had returned and as they already had two functioning mosques: ‘Who would go to it? We don’t need another mosque.’ Yet when we saw the site of the Dugalića Mosque, it was if the 15 years since we had travelled around Republika Srpska looking at parking lots and heaps of stones had not passed. The unfenced site was still being used for parking cars, still had rubbish dumpsters parked on it and was still being used for chopping wood, all – in theory – illegal. Meanwhile the nearby Serbian Orthodox Church, its precinct surrounded by a low fence, was carefully and beautifully kept.

Memorial mosques

The urge for the ethnically cleansed to re-establish a visible presence in the landscape also encompasses the phenomenon of what Carlton has called ‘memorial mosques’ – that is, mosques that were reconstructed in the absence of any Muslim returnees to places that were ethnically cleansed (Carlton 2017). One was the historic seventeenth-century Avdić Mosque in the devastated Muslim village of Plana, just north of Bileća and about 40 miles as the crow flies from the Adriatic coast, with its distinctive square campanile minaret believed to have been originally built by Christian builders from Dubrovnik. Another was the small mosque without a minaret (mesdžid) in the tiny hamlet of Skočigrm, close to the Montenegrin border.

Through internet and other fundraising activities, donations for rebuilding these two mosques came from donors dispersed by ethnic cleansing as far afield as the United States, Canada, Singapore, Indonesia, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as throughout Bosnia and the region. Many donors had once been resident or had family connections to the localities, but others had no connection at all. In the United States the Association of Citizens of Bileća in Chicago held a special campaign for the reconstruction of the Avdić Mosque. The fundraising and reconstructions proceeded slowly: while the main structure of the Avdić Mosque had been rebuilt by 2010, there were not
sufficient funds to complete the work, and it was not formally reopened until August 2013. Yet not a single person had returned to live in the devastated village, and when we visited Plana and the Avdić Mosque in 2015 its houses were still abandoned roofless shells.

Yet although there has been no return of living Muslim communities to either Plana or Skočigrm, nevertheless both mosques are used, if rarely. In early May 2017, for the first time in 25 years, a mevlud was held at the Avdić Mosque, bringing together Bilećani from Scandinavia, America, Canada and Australia, as well as from towns and cities in the Federation (balkans.aljazeera.net 2017). And in one respect there is a growing permanent congregation, a phenomenon repeated at countless reconstructed religious sites across Bosnia-Herzegovina – a congregation of the dead. Graveyards are gradually being populated by the recent dead and their memorials, as the absent or those who left before the war and their descendants choose to be buried in the precincts of their ancestral mosque or church.

**Note**

1. The Islamic Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina is both a legal entity and the highest Muslim religious authority in the country.

**References**


