

Title: Identity and Conflict: Cultural Heritage, Reconstruction and National Identity in Kosovo

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Abstract:

The year 1989 marked the six hundredth anniversary of the defeat of the Christian Prince of Serbia, Lazard I, at the hands of the Ottoman Empire in the “Valley of the Blackbirds,” Kosovo. On June 28, 1989, the very day of the battle's anniversary, thousands of Serbs gathered on the presumed historic battle field bearing nationalistic symbols and honoring the Serbian martyrs buried in Orthodox churches across the territory. They were there to hear a speech delivered by Slobodan Milosevic in which the then-president of the Socialist Republic of Serbia revived Lazard's mythic battle and martyrdom. It was a symbolic act aimed at establishing a version of history that saw Kosovo as part of the Serbian nation. It marked the commencement of a violent process of subjugation that culminated in genocide. Fully integrated into the complex web of tragic violence that was to ensue was the targeting and destruction of the region's architectural and cultural heritage. As with the peoples of the region, this heritage crossed geopolitical “boundaries.”

Through the fluctuations of history, Kosovo's heritage had already become subject to divergent temporal, geographical, physical and even symbolical forces. During the war it was to become a focal point of clashes between these forces and, as Anthony D. Smith argues with regard to cultural heritage more generally, it would be seen as “a legacy belonging to the past of ‘the other,’” which, in times of conflict, opponents try “to damage or even deny.” Today, the scars of this conflict, its damage and its denial are still evident. However, there are initiatives that are now seeking to use heritage – architectural and otherwise – as a way of fostering respect and dialogue between the cultures still reeling from the effects of the conflict. Having been seen as an originating factor in the conflict and made into a target for attack during the war, heritage is now seen as a facilitator for peacekeeping. As is to be expected, this is a complex, polemic, fraught and contested process.