Chapter 3

The Old Bridge: Knowing the Facts

I An Overview

Cultural destruction in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s is sad testimony to the fate of cultural treasures in times of armed conflict and to the consequences of the loss incurred. Immovable cultural property embodied in objects of both cultural specificity and cultural unity was deliberately targeted, \textit{inter alia}, to cause people to flee and never return, to destroy evidence of coexistence and to rewrite history. Cultural property was destroyed to such an extent that the terms 'cultural genocide' and 'cultural cleansing' were coined.\textsuperscript{1} Cities in particular were deliberately targeted because they contained visible physical evidence of the shared past and present. Burnt buildings of exceptional artistic value, burnt archives and libraries containing rare collections of books and manuscripts, and centuries-old places of worship after being dynamited and historic bridges blown up are just a few examples of what cities such as Vukovar, Dubrovnik, Sarajevo and Mostar endured. The urban devastation was so profound that it was labelled 'urbicide'.\textsuperscript{2} The damage done to cultural property in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s was considered the worst in post-WWII Europe; 'a major cultural catastrophe'\textsuperscript{3} is how the COE described it. This catastrophe turned yesterday’s neighbours, friends and relatives into ‘us’ and ‘them’, dividing cities in the process and erasing memories.

While cultural heritage in all parts of the former Yugoslavia suffered significant losses, the cultural heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina paid a particularly high price.\textsuperscript{4} All parties to the conflict bear their share of guilt in destroying or forever scarring numerous churches, mosques, libraries, archives,

\textsuperscript{2} The term ‘urbicide’ was coined by Belgrade architect, Bogdan Bogdanović.
\textsuperscript{3} Committee on Culture and Education of Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe (COE), \textit{First Information Report}, doc 6756, 2 February 1993, 3 [First COE Report].
monuments and other culturally significant structures. Nevertheless, the case that has attracted the greatest publicity is the destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar by the Croat forces. Built in 1566 by the Ottoman architect Hayreddin and admired by everyone for its technical perfection and aesthetic beauty, the Old Bridge had become a heritage treasure of Mostar, the city named after a bridge, and of all Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition to its artistic and scientific value, this masterpiece of architecture embodied the history of all people (Muslims, Croats, Serbs, Jews and others) who lived on the two banks of the Neretva River, which it gracefully linked for 427 years. The Bridge was a public monument, free of ethnicity. It symbolised the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic and religious communities. It was the city’s landmark, which distinguished the city itself and its citizens from others, giving them a special identity. The Mostarians shared both the city and the Bridge and were deeply attached to and proud of both of them.

On 9 November 1993, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the rest of the world were shocked by the news of the destruction of the world’s largest single stone arch. Croatian army tanks deliberately targeted this steep, slippery footbridge. As the Bridge crumbled into the icy waters of the Neretva, the HVO sent the message that, in the absence of the elegant connection between the banks of the River and the symmetry of the towers on each of its ends, the union and harmony of different cultures in Mostar was no longer preserved. Ultimately, this was a symbolic confirmation of the intention of Croatia, which controlled the HVO, to redraw the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The destruction of the Bridge occurred during armed conflict between Croats and Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, referred to as ‘a war within the war’. With Croatia’s support, the conflict was aimed at establishing HVO control over certain territories in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which would eventually secede and become

5 Amir Pašić, *The Old Bridge (Stari Most) in Mostar* (1995) [*The Old Bridge*].
6 The name ‘Mostar’ means ‘a bridge keeper’. But as Belgrade architect Bogdan Bogdanović observes, ‘the name of the city of Mostar is much layered information’. It puts together two pictures and two categories – a bridge and a city – and connects them into an indivisible semantic pair, which is, by further language magic, packed into a united name with multiple meanings. See Bogdan Bogdanović, ‘Može li grad bez svog mosta, može li most bez svog grada’ (‘Can the City be without Its Bridge; Can the Bridge be without Its City?’), *Most*, No. 139, June 2001, http://wl.500.telia.com/~u5000875/50/010.htm [*Most*].
7 Pašić, *The Old Bridge*, above n 5, 3.