

Bridges as Barriers: The role of bridges in the Yugoslav wars of succession

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Abstract

This paper will examine the role bridges played in the break-up of Yugoslavia, i.e. the Yugoslav wars of succession (1992-2001). The author considers the case to be a prototypical demonstration of the ambivalent symbolic character of bridges, as they proved to both connect and divide neighboring community in the examination. The thesis shall be developed in two steps:

First, this paper will lay out the architectural heritage at hand. For centuries, bridges have acted as pathways between communities in the mountainous and water-rich Balkan peninsula. Thus, they often acquired a staggering amount of cultural signification. Especially the Ottoman bridges, like *Latin Bridge* in Sarajevo and *Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge* in Višegrad, became symbols of both multi-culturalism and common architectural heritage.

However, during Yugoslav wars some bridges gained notoriety as icons of separation, which shall be explored in the second part. Most prominently, the deliberate destruction of the *Old Bridge*, a 16th century Ottoman landmark in the Herzegovinian town of Mostar, was of high symbolic capacity for all parties in the conflict. The destructive act of Bosnian Croat forces has been described as “killing memory” (Riedlmayer), as it predominantly targeted the bridge as an icon of coexistence. Today, the reconstructed arch fails to reconnect the Bosniak and Croat communities on the banks of the river Neretva, forming a symbolic barrier within the divided townscape.

This paper will shed light on a similar, less well-known case: the *New Bridge* in Kosovska Mitrovica, a Kosovar town split between Serb and Albanian communities. Here, the bridge even constitutes a physical barrier. Due to heavy Serb-Albanian clashes in the aftermath of the Kosovo war, it has for years been guarded by KFOR troops, subsequently closed down and fortified with barricades. Just recently, EU-funded restoration of the bridge fed hopes for soon re-opening and free passage.