



The Threatened Armenian Religious Heritage of Artsakh



On the cover: Holy Savior Cathedral, commonly referred to as Ghazanchetsots, is an Armenian Apostolic cathedral in Shushi, Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), consecrated in 1888. On October 8, 2020, the Cathedral, considered a safe space to shelter by many civilians and journalists, was bombed twice by Azerbaijan, which resulted in the collapse of part of the roof. A Russian journalist was seriously injured by the second strike. Two others were also wounded. Human Rights Watch (HRW) noted that the two attacks “suggest that the church, a civilian object with cultural significance, was an intentional target despite the absence of evidence that it was used for military purposes.” HRW collected remnants of the weapon used against the church, which “corroborate the use of guided munitions.” On 7 November 2020, the Azerbaijani forces seized control over the town of Shushi. In May 2021, reports were made that the dome and the cross of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral had been removed. Azerbaijani state officials have claimed that the renovation project aimed to restore the “original” appearance of the church, which, according to them, lacked the conical dome. However, the conical dome of the church can be seen in photographs from over a century ago.

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Executive Summary: Since Azerbaijan's capture of the disputed, predominantly Christian Armenian-populated region of Artsakh (also known as Nagorno-Karabakh), the territory's entire indigenous Armenian population has been ethnically cleansed. Over 100,000 Christian Armenians fled their ancestral homeland after a nine-month starvation siege and a lightning military attack that threatened the physical safety of the indigenous population. Left behind are hundreds of sacred sites that Azerbaijan proclaims as "fakes or forgeries," and its record of total cultural erasure in another historically-Armenian region — Nakhichevan — makes the threat of destruction more than real.

Context

Ethnoterritorial conflicts often entail the targeting of sacred sites. Recent acts of religious heritage destruction include the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas, a holy site for Hazaras in Afghanistan,¹ and the destruction of the Temples of Ba'al (Bel) and Baalshamin, world-renowned UNESCO-recognized sites of pre-Islamic religious heritage, in Palmyra, Syria.² The former was undertaken upon the orders of the Taliban in 2001. Afghanistan at that time was controlled by the Taliban, which effectively silenced its citizens and eliminated the possibility of any actions or objections from its citizens. When the Taliban declared these statues as "idols" and therefore blasphemous objects, these two monumental 6th-century Buddha statues were destroyed, to the dismay of the international religious community and cultural heritage experts. Similarly, the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL) used explosives to destroy the Temples of Ba'al and Baalshamin. It did so within months of capturing the city of Palmyra. ISIL videotaped the destruction and shared the footage, denouncing the sites as blasphemous idolatry and destroying invaluable evidence of the rich, pre-Islamic cultural heritage in Syria. Less known examples of politically-motivated targeting of religious heritage are China's recent destruction of Uyghur mosques and Azerbaijan's 1997-2006 expungement of all traces of indigenous Armenian Christian heritage in Nakhichevan.

These examples of the destruction of politically inconvenient, undesired religious and cultural heritage sites are instructive for the current situation in Artsakh. Azerbaijan, a petro-dictatorship governed by the Aliyev family since 1993, currently controls Artsakh, the ancient, historic homeland of the Armenians, having forcibly expelled the entire indigenous Armenian population in late September, 2023. Left behind in Artsakh are thousands of churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and khachkars (intricately carved cross-stones³) that bear witness to the existence and flourishing of the Armenians over many centuries. The precondition of silencing the population whose cultural and religious heritage is at risk

¹ *Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley*, UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/208/>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

² *Site of Palmyra*, UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23/>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

³ *Armenian Cross-Stones Art. Symbolism and Craftsmanship of Khachkars*, UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/armenian-cross-stones-art-symbolism-and-craftsmanship-of-khachkars-00434>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024). (UNESCO since 2010 recognizes khachkars as intangible cultural heritage).

has been achieved—in this case by removing the people themselves. The Armenian Christian religious and cultural heritage left behind in Artsakh is now at imminent risk of total destruction.

The Precondition: Ethnic Cleansing

According to the United Nations definition, “**ethnic cleansing**” is the “rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove from a given area persons of another ethnic or religious group.”⁴ This can be accomplished by “**genocide**,” the extermination of a people, or by “**forced migration**,” either by state-sanctioned deportation or by making the situation so nonviable that the group of people is forced to leave their homeland, often with only what they can carry.

The mass extermination of the Armenians and their forced deportation from their homeland perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks in 1915 was the first modern **genocide** of the 20th century. Sadly for the Armenian nation, regardless of terminology, history has repeated itself.

This is not the only time that Armenians have been forced to migrate from their ancestral homelands. In the early 20th century, the Soviet Union seized control of the whole of the South Caucasus region and designated the region of Nakhichevan as an autonomous exclave under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. At that time, despite the WWI-era Ottoman massacres, at least 40% of the population of Nakhichevan was still Armenian, with the remaining population consisting of an approximately equal number of Azerbaijanis. After decades of discrimination and persecution against local ethnic Armenians by the Azerbaijani authorities, by the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Nakhichevan’s remaining ethnic Armenians comprised approximately 2% of the population. Left behind in Nakhichevan then, as in Artsakh now, was a bounty of Armenian religious and cultural heritage monuments and sites.

Most recently, in September, 2023, after enduring a more than nine month blockade of Artsakh imposed and enforced by Azerbaijan — and encouraged by Turkey — where there was no food, no medicine, intermittent fuel, unreliable electricity, spotty internet, threatened water supply, no access to and no egress out for the local citizenry, 120,000 Armenians were forced to migrate, leaving behind their homes, livelihoods, farms, fruit orchards, animal herds, vineyards, churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other religious and cultural sites.

The Aftermath: Cultural Genocide

“**Cultural genocide**” is the process by which any and all cultural or religious traces of the group of people exterminated or forced to migrate is destroyed or removed from the land⁵. This process can be accomplished in many ways, among them: outright destruction; erasure (sometimes euphemized as “renovation”) of the distinctive identifying cultural or religious features present in cultural and religious heritage sites; “reclassification,” i.e. mis-attributing the cultural heritage to another culture; or deliberate undertaking of adjacent construction without enforcement of architectural impact assessments on cultural or religious heritage sites. The targets of the destruction or removal, erasure, reclassification, or neglectful adjacent construction are the very same cultural and religious heritage sites of those who were forced to migrate, including churches, monasteries, and cemeteries.

⁴ *Ethnic Cleansing*, U.N. OFF. ON GENOCIDE PREVENTION AND THE RESP. TO PROTECT., <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.shtml>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

⁵ Arm. GENOCIDE MUSEUM-INST. FOUND., <http://www.genocide-museum.am> (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

A precedential example of “**cultural genocide**” at the hands of Azerbaijan occurred in recent times in Nakhichevan, the aforementioned region that was emptied of Armenians by the 1990s. From 1997 until 2006, when there were no Armenians living in the exclave, Azerbaijan set out to eliminate all Armenian religious and cultural heritage from the area. The most notable act of destruction was carried out by the Azerbaijani military in Julfa (Jugha), in an Armenian cemetery where they destroyed thousands of khachkars (carved cross-stones) from the Middle Ages. The state-sanctioned policy was implemented and carried out to such an extent that today in Nakhichevan there is no trace of Armenian religious or cultural heritage remaining.^{6, 7}

This brings us to the recent developments in the region. On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani authorities unleashed a military attack on the indigenous ethnic Armenian civilian population of Artsakh after months of deliberate starvation and blockade of the only road to Artsakh—cutting it off from the outside world. This blockade was briefly lifted only to allow 120,000 starved ethnic Armenians to flee to neighboring Armenia—taking the only road out. These ethnic Artsakh Armenians are now displaced refugees living in Armenia—unable to return safely to their homeland.

Instead, Azerbaijan is busy resettling Artsakh with Azerbaijani citizens, ceding to them the private homes, farms, vineyards and businesses of the forcibly displaced Armenians. As for the collective Armenian cultural and Christian religious heritage that have also been left behind, reports from the Azerbaijani authorities and other observers indicate that the authorities have undertaken a policy bearing the hallmarks of cultural genocide.

The Heritage at Risk

In 1984, some 1,600 religious and cultural monuments were recorded in Artsakh. These include churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and khachkars.⁸ Among the religious heritage left behind are three Armenian monasteries in particular: Amaras, Dadivank, and Gandzasar. A 2011 survey enumerated 4,115 monuments⁹, though more monuments have been unearthed in recent years.

⁶ Simon Maghakyan & Sarah Pickman, *A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture*, HYPERALLERGIC (Feb. 18, 2019), <https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>.

⁷ Simon Maghakyan, *Sacred Stones Silenced in Azerbaijan*, HIST. TODAY (Nov. 2007), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/sacred-stones-silenced-azerbaijan> (Widely cited as “cultural genocide” is Azerbaijan’s destruction of thousands of medieval Armenian khachkars in Julfa, Nakhichevan, and Azerbaijan’s subsequent denial that the site ever existed); Parliamentary Group Switzerland-Armenia: **The Destruction of Jugha and the entire Armenian Cultural Heritage in Nakhijevan**, Documentation submitted to UNESCO in October 2006 by an International Parliamentary Delegation, Bern, 2006; Catherine Womack, *Historic Armenian monuments were obliterated. Some call it 'cultural genocide'*, L.A. TIMES (Nov. 7, 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-11-07/armenian-monuments-azerbaijan>.

⁸ V. V. Zakeyan, *Karabagh Has Always Been an Armenian Land*, NAVASART PUB. (1984).

⁹ FOTO. Artsakhum petakanoren grantsvats patmamshakut'ayin ansharzh hushardzanneri 4115-e vtangi tak en, ZHOGHOVURD T'ERT' [PHOTO: 4,115 of the state-registered historical and cultural monuments in Artsakh are in danger. ZHOGHOVURD NEWSPAPER], <https://armlur.am/1331004/> (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).



Amaras, photograph by Siranush Sargsyan, September, 2023

Armenia became the first Christian nation in 301 A.D. when St. Gregory the Illuminator introduced the religion to the Armenian Kingdom, before the Roman Empire's own adoption of Christianity several decades later. St. Gregory the Illuminator then went on to found the monastery of Amaras in Artsakh in the early 4th century¹⁰. Mesrop Mashtots, who invented the Armenian alphabet in the early 5th century, established the first Armenian school in Amaras to use the new alphabet. St. Gregory's grandson, St. Grigoris is also buried at Amaras. This is a Christian shrine of enormous importance to the Armenians.

¹⁰ Nagorno Karabakh, AMARAS, <https://www.amaras.org/nagorno-karabakh/>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).



Photo of Dadivank Monastery Photographed by Alex Jundanian, October, 2019

Dadivank¹¹ is a large monastic complex of multiple buildings, established by Armenians in or before the 9th century, and is said to have been built on the grave of Dadi, a disciple of the Apostle Thaddeus. It was, until Azerbaijan's aggression and seizure, a working monastery that had continued its centuries-long tradition as a center for advancements in religious education and scholarship.

¹¹ *The monastic complex of Dadivank. General information*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-monastic-complex-of-dadivank-general-information/> (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).



Photographed by Jirair and Rita Kuyumjian, October 2019

Gandzasar¹² is a 13th century Armenian monastery, also a historic and vibrant center for scholarship and culture, and reputed as the place where St. John the Baptist's head is enshrined. Illuminated manuscripts were created here and a Code of Laws was drafted here in the 13th century by scholar and monk Mkhitar Gosh. It is a major Christian shrine.

Outright Destruction of Armenian Churches by Azerbaijan

Caucasus Heritage Watch, a research institution based at Cornell University and Purdue University, is an organization that monitors cultural heritage destruction by comparing satellite images over time. It documented the complete destruction in 2022 of St. Sargis Church in Mokhrenes, an area of Artsakh where the Azerbaijanis seized control in 2020.¹³ In its most recent report¹⁴, Caucasus Heritage Watch has documented that there appears to be construction on the site of the destroyed church. Satellite images point to a policy of destruction under the guise of construction, including that of historical cemeteries in Shushi.

¹² Armenian Apostolic Church monastery, GANDZASAR.COM, <https://www.gandzasar.com/cathedral-of-st-john-baptist.htm> (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

¹³ Ian Lindsay, Adam T. Smith, & Lori Khatchadourian, CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH, MONITORING REPORT #4 21 (2022).

¹⁴ Lori Khatchadourian, Ian Lindsay, Adam T. Smith, & Husik Ghulyan, CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH, MONITORING REPORT #6 36 (2023).

These actions are in complete defiance of the International Court of Justice's Provisional Measures, Order of December 7, 2021,¹⁵ which instructs Azerbaijan to "take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artifacts."

Another organization condemning Azerbaijan's actions is the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) which adopted a resolution on September 27, 2021, also holding Azerbaijan accountable for its egregious actions and particularly focusing on "what appears to be the deliberate shelling of the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral...(Ghazanchetsots Holy Savior Cathedral) ...as well as the destruction or damage of other churches and cemeteries."¹⁶

Recent articles continue to raise the alarm about the danger of destruction for the Armenian religious and cultural heritage in Artsakh.¹⁷

Cultural Erasure under the Guise of "Renovation"

There are also efforts to "restore" certain Armenian churches by removing the distinctive domes and replacing them with other architectural elements that are not recognized as Christian Armenian, and efforts to deface the churches by removing the Armenian inscriptions carved into stone. The Ghazanchetsots Cathedral (seen on the cover) is a masterpiece of Armenian architecture with a distinctive conical dome. This dome has now been removed and the church is being "restored" according to Azerbaijani officials, to what it looked like before Armenian "misappropriation."¹⁸

Azerbaijan Wrongfully Reclassifies Armenian Religious and Cultural Heritage

The Azerbaijan government has developed a revisionist history to explain away the vast numbers of examples of Armenian religious and cultural heritage that dot the landscape in Artsakh, the ancestral homeland of the Armenians. The basic falsification is that the Armenians did not create such culture—but rather the Caucasian Albanians did. This distortion continues with accusations that the Armenians

¹⁵ *Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), Provisional Measures, Order of 7 December 2021, I.C.J. Reports 2021, p. 361, 391.* <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/180/180-20211207-ORD-01-00-EN.pdf>.

¹⁶ MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh, EUR. PARL. DOC. B9-0146/2022 (2022). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2022-0146_EN.html.

¹⁷ Simon Maghakyan, *Emboldened by Ukraine Crisis, Azerbaijan Escalates its War on Armenian Heritage Sites*, HYPERALLERGIC (Feb. 4, 2022), <https://hyperallergic.com/709512/azerbaijan-escalates-its-war-on-armenian-heritage-sites/>; Maya Pontone, *Azerbaijan Escalates Attacks on Armenian Heritage Sites*, HYPERALLERGIC (Dec. 27, 2023), <https://hyperallergic.com/830115/azerbaijan-escalates-attacks-on-armenian-heritage-sites/>.

¹⁸ Azerbaijani Ambassador Ilgar Mukhtarov (@ilMukhtarov), TWITTER (June 7, 2023, 9:18 PM), <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/RfHAa>, ("The church which was misappropriated by #Armenians is currently regaining its original appearance").

defaced the Caucasian Albanian culture, hence the efforts to “restore” are justified¹⁹. The current Azerbaijan dictatorship is completely aligned with this falsification and has decreed that all textbooks must teach this false history.²⁰

A recent report by the Human Rights Network states that “The revisionism has extended to a successful campaign to rename and publish false historical data about Armenian churches on Google maps, including sites known to and visited by UNHR (University Network for Human Rights) researchers.”²¹

Construction as a Cover for Destruction

Construction can be misused as a tool to accomplish the destruction of cultural and religious heritage and, at the moment, Azerbaijan is choosing to employ this tool in just this way. According to Caucasus Heritage Watch’s most recent report²², a road was recently built straight through the Ghazanchetsots cemetery without regard to the destruction of numerous Armenian-inscribed headstones in its path. As reported by Azerbaijani news outlets and public media, there are plans to build residential housing on the site. This would entail the destruction of several other adjacent Armenian heritage sites. It also demonstrates the impunity of the current regime: in its stated goal of building residential housing it will necessarily be violating the ICJ Provisional Order. And it does not care.

Conclusion

As we begin the year 2024, we have hope that the international community, religious organizations, cultural preservation organizations, governments, and civil society groups, among others, will speak out and condemn Azerbaijan’s actions and, more importantly, take action to protect the endangered Armenian cultural and religious heritage in Artsakh. Azerbaijan cannot be allowed to follow in the pariah footsteps of the Taliban and ISIL with impunity. The world’s voice, conscience, and might must convey that the pursuit of deliberate destruction of Armenian religious and cultural heritage by Azerbaijan is unacceptable and will be answered with significant consequences for Azerbaijan. Once destroyed, Armenian religious and cultural heritage is irreplaceable and its destruction will leave our world and the Christian community, a poorer place.

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January, 2024

¹⁹ ‘Forgeries’: The Armenian Art That Azerbaijan May ‘Erase’ From Churches, RADIOFREEEUROPE RADIOLIBRARY, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-armenia-churches-inscriptions-erase/31693154.html>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

²⁰ *Caucasus Heritage Watch: Azerbaijan is Destroying Armenian Heritage*, CULTURAL PROP. NEWS, <https://culturalpropertynews.org/caucasus-heritage-watch-azerbaijan-destroys-armenian-heritage/>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

²¹ *We Are No One: How Three Years of Atrocities Against Ethnic Armenians Led to Ethnic Cleansing*, HUM. RTS. NETWORK, <https://humanrightsnetwork.shorthandstories.com/we-are-no-one/attacks-on-cultural-heritage/index.html>. (last visited Jan. 17, 2024).

²² Lori Khatchadourian, Ian Lindsay, Adam T. Smith, & Husik Ghulyan, CAUCASUS HERITAGE WATCH, MONITORING REPORT #6 21 (2023).



The Armenian Bar Association is a non-profit, non-partisan organization formed in 1989 to enable attorneys of Armenian heritage and other interested individuals to better serve the law, the legal profession, and the Armenian community.

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Coming together socially and professionally, members from around the world have the opportunity to learn from one another as they join their different backgrounds and experiences in Association activities.

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