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Abstract: *The preservation of the Armenian architectural heritage of Artsakh in the 21st century faces significant challenges, primarily stemming from armed conflicts and ethnocultural and religious intolerance. The wars initiated by Azerbaijan against Artsakh and Armenia, beyond territorial conquest, aim to erase Armenian identity, history, and cultural landscape systematically. Architectural monuments, as tangible evidence of historical Armenian presence in these territories, stand as a cultural obstacle to this agenda. The deliberate destruction of Armenian cultural values and historical and cultural heritage exemplifies Azerbaijan's long-standing policy of cultural genocide. For over a century, even during peacetime, Armenian Christian heritage in regions such as Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh has suffered irreversible losses. This destruction continues today at an even larger scale, particularly following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. The article presents the vandal actions of Azerbaijan, which began at the time of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1991-1994) and continue to this day, which are carried out against Armenian Christian monuments (Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church and St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church (St. John the Baptist), or Kanach Zham (Green Church), in Shushi, Gandzasar, Dadivank, Amaras, the monastery complexes of Yeghnasar, churches of Tsitsernavank, Vankasar, Tsaghkavank, and many, many others). These actions unfold through various forms, including physical destruction, appropriation, disfigurement, desecration, and changing the primary function of tangible heritage. The principles of authenticity, integrity, and the importance of safeguarding the Armenian historical legacy in the international system for the preservation of the Christian heritage of Artsakh are revealed. Initiatives aimed at preserving the medieval heritage of the region were noted.*

Keywords: *Armenian architectural heritage, preservation, the cultural policy of Azerbaijan, distortion, albanization.*

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Introduction

The architectural heritage of Artsakh, which has a thousand-year architectural history, has always been the target of Azerbaijan's anti-Armenian policy. The policy of destruction, transformation, and desecration of Armenian monasteries, churches, and monuments was aimed at destroying the Armenian trace in Artsakh. Azerbaijan's ambitions towards the Armenian territories have always been connected with false attempts to legitimize the Azerbaijani presence in the region. The beginning of Azerbaijan's systemic policy of destruction and expropriation of cultural, and in particular, architectural values was set by the influence of the extreme nationalistic policy of Turkey, which started in 1918. From the formation of Azerbaijan as a state and the 1930s, the concept of "Azerbaijani people" came into circulation [1]. In the Soviet period, these approaches developed, turning into large-scale wars in the post-Soviet period. Azerbaijani propaganda is constantly trying to "prove" that Armenians in the Caucasus, and especially in the territory of Artsakh, are immigrants or that they are the natives and descendants of the Christian Agvans here. There are many monuments proving the

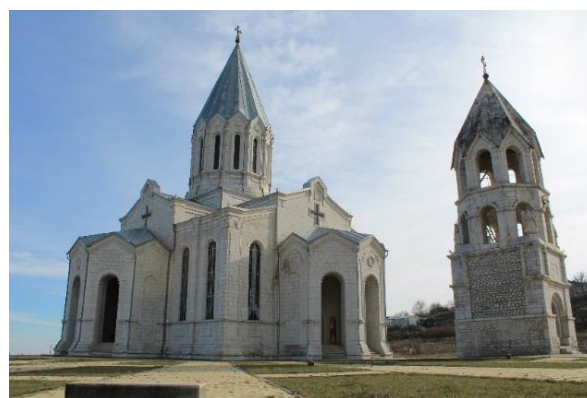
¹ Some of the concepts discussed in this article are presented on the website Monumentwatch created by us.

opposite in the Armenian highlands and particularly in the territory of Artsakh-Karabakh, which were an "obstacle" for Azerbaijan on the way to achieving their ultimate goal because they are indicators of ethnicity.

In 1994, after the indefinite cease-fire in May, the Republic of Artsakh started to organize the preservation of architectural monuments. The process was slow. It was hindered by several circumstances (the non-political recognition of the Republic of Artsakh, the war situation, the priority security issues, being cut off from international cooperation, and the prohibitions and complications of joining international structures). Nevertheless, some measures for the protection of architectural monuments were implemented (creation of a legislative system in the field of protection, compilation of lists of architectural monuments, discovery of newly discovered monuments (Artsakh's Tigranakert complex, Handaberdi monastery), implementation of fixing and restoration of monuments (Holy All Savior Khazanchetsots and Hovhannes Mkrtych Churches in Shushi, Toghi Melik complex, walls of Shushi, Dadivank, Amaras, Vankasar, and Pirumashen Churches, Tsitsernavank), three-dimensional modeling, etc.) (Fig.1).



a.



b.

Fig. 1. a. *The view of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi from the northwest (1972), Photo: a page from the book by Mkrtychyan Sh., Davtyan Sch., 1997*
b. *General view of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots and the bell tower of Shushi from the northwest (after restoration, 1998), photo by L. Kirakosyan*

Slowly, but the ongoing process was stopped in 2020 with the war unleashed by Azerbaijan against the Republic of Artsakh on September 27, which was aimed not only at the elimination of the civilian population but also against the cultural heritage of that area. New challenges faced Armenian, especially Christian, architectural builders and structures. Their targeting of the many cases of vandalism both during the war and after the ceasefire proves that the Azerbaijani authorities, using various expropriation mechanisms, eliminate the traces of Armenians and Armenianness in the occupied territories, "legitimizing" their policy. The issue of architectural heritage in the territory of the Republic of Artsakh, occupied and depopulated by Azerbaijan, is a matter of survival and has caused concern in both the Armenian and the international communities.

According to the Artsakh human rights defender's 2021 January report, the endangered heritage includes 161 Armenian churches and monastic complexes, of which 56 are in Hadrut, 42 in Karvachar, 26 in Kashatagh, 13 in Askeran, 9 in Martakert, the same number in Martuni, and 6 in Shushi; 591 khachkars and 345 inscribed stones and tombstones; and 43 palaces and fortresses².

Materials and Methods

During the research, bibliographic materials were used, and the method of comparative analysis and original research was employed. Reference was made to declarations and laws of international structures for the

² The Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Artsakh, Ad Hoc Public Report. The Armenian Cultural Heritage in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh): Cases of Vandalism and at Risk of Destruction by Azerbaijan, Stepanakert, 26 January, 2021.

protection of monuments. Related materials posted on Azerbaijani websites in 2021-2024, as well as publications on the website "Monument Watch"³, were also used.

Results and Discussion

Artsakh's architectural heritage and Azerbaijan's consistent policy of vandalism

In the conditions of war and peace, it has been more than 100 years since the Armenian Christian architectural heritage suffered irreversible losses in Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh as a result of the policy conducted by Azerbaijan, which continues even today on a larger scale. In the current situation, the Artsakh architectural heritage is facing new challenges. It is in a highly endangered state and needs immediate support.

The article presents the actions that Azerbaijan has taken with regard to these complexes with individual examples and indicates the ways that the architectural heritage should be protected.

Starting in 2020, the city of Shushi has become a focal point of Azerbaijan's deliberate agenda to erase and appropriate Armenian historical and cultural heritage in the occupied regions of Artsakh. Following the cessation of war, Azerbaijan swiftly enacted a state policy aimed at reshaping and confiscating the Armenian historical and cultural landscape of Shushi. This policy traces back to the Soviet era, specifically the 1960s, when the history of Shushi City underwent revision. As a result, scientific and popular literature focusing on the city began to portray Shushi as exclusively Azerbaijani, gradually minimizing references to its Armenian cultural and historical heritage and ultimately omitting them altogether. It is important to highlight that between the 1960s and 1992, the Azerbaijani authorities successfully undertook the destruction and alteration of a substantial portion of Shushi's Armenian cultural heritage, which encompassed the city's Armenian cemeteries as well.

Following the occupation of the city by Azerbaijan in 2020, a fresh phase in the de-Armenization of Shushi emerged (Fig.2).

Novel narratives were introduced, notably designating the city's central symbols, the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church and the St. Hovhannes Mkrtich Church, as Russian Orthodox churches. Within these churches, the Azerbaijani authorities commenced "rehabilitation" initiatives, primarily aimed at erasing the Armenian essence of these structures, to showcase this to the international community [2].

The fundamental objective behind these alterations to Armenian churches and other structures is to eliminate the Armenian characteristics of Shushi. This culminates the trajectory set in motion by the state dating back to the 1960s.

The St. Hovhannes Mkrtich Church of Shushi was targeted during the military operations of the 2020 war, violating the international principles of wartime heritage protection and humanitarian law norms. Shortly after the 2020 war, the St. Hovhannes Mkrtich Church was blown up, damaging the church steeple and bell tower (Figs. 3-5). Later, in July 2021, Azerbaijanis unjustifiably denied the Armenian affiliation of the church, started the work of presenting the structure as Russian Orthodox and "transforming" the church, and performed illegal



Fig. 2. *The exterior of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in 2020, during the war, after the bombing⁴*

³ monumentwatch.org.

⁴ Photo source: meganewes.am/assets/uploads/7vu8puzzo7ftn596c1mz1605464215.

rituals in the church. Unable to find a valid argument to de-Armenianize it, Azerbaijan ultimately destroyed the church (Figs. 3,4).

Damage to the church, as outlined in the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in Armed Conflict, constitutes a serious violation. According to Article 4 of the Convention and, additionally, Article 15(a) of the adopted Second Protocol in 1999, such actions can be prosecuted as war crimes in international courts⁵.

A similar violation is also the physical destruction of the churches of St. Astvatsatsin in Mehakavan, destroyed on March 25, 2021 (construction began in 2013, completed and consecrated in 2017), and in October—the churches of St. Sarkis in the village of Mokhrenes and St. Holy Ascension in Berdzor (the construction of the church was completed in 1998, and the cross on the dome it was consecrated on May 31 of the same year) (Fig.5).



Fig. 3. General view of the St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church of Shushi from the southwest, 2020, before the war⁶



a.



b.

Fig. 4. The process of physical destruction of the St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church: **a.** During the war of 2020, **b.** After the war of 2024⁷.



Fig. 5. Destruction of the Holy Ascension Church in Berdzor⁸

⁵ Available at: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=31415> (accessed on October 2, 2024).

⁶ Photo source: <https://surl.lu/cabohe>

⁷ Photo source: <https://surl.li/nsmyik>

⁸ Photo source: <https://surl.li/igguri>

The report of CHW, documenting the destruction of the church⁹, was submitted to the European Parliament and has already been condemned by a number of deputies. As strong evidence of the ongoing policy of Azerbaijan, it was included in the report "New European Agenda for Culture and International Cultural Relations", which, on the one hand, condemned Azerbaijan for such practices, and on the other hand, showed the negative consequences of such practices in the field of world cultural policy.

Another manifestation of encroachments on architectural heritage is their Albanization and privatization. In March 2021, during a visit to the Hadrut region, and in particular to Tsakur, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, pointing to the inscription on the lintel of St. Astvatsatsin Church of Tsaghkavank, stated that the inscriptions and carved crosses had just been engraved and that it was an Armenianized Udi church¹⁰.

This once again speaks of the fact that the Armenian cultural heritage in the occupied territories is being altered and destroyed under high state patronage [3].

Dadivank, Gandzasar, Amaras monasteries, and the Vankasar church were declared Albanian, contrary to all possible evidence (building inscriptions in Armenian, structural and structural features, etc.) [4-7].

This theory has been repeatedly condemned by Armenian and international scientists [8,9]. According to Adam Smith, Armenian churches, in particular Dadivank, could not have been founded by a kingdom called Caucasian Albania, which fell into decline around the 8th century [10] (Fig.6).

The agvanization of Armenian historical churches and the denial of Armenians is a violation of the principle of authenticity of heritage established by UNESCO and the process of destroying history and identity. The importance of preserving the authenticity of cultural heritage is stated in the Nara document on the authenticity of Cultural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in Japan in 1994¹¹.



a.



b.

Fig. 6. *The Katoghike (main) Church of Dadivank:*
a. before restoration, **b.** after restoration, photo by S. Ayvazyan

⁹ Available at: <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/index.php/report>. (accessed on October 9, 2024).

¹⁰ Available at: <https://youtu.be/blq-Kn1QnMs> (accessed on October 17, 2024).

¹¹ Available at: <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>. (accessed on November 1, 2024).

Cases of desecration of architectural heritage (the monastery of Kataro, the monastery of the Apostles of Egishe) are also not isolated.

The International Court of Justice of The Hague in 2021. The decision of December 7 banned acts of desecration of Armenian churches: "Azerbaijan is obliged to take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration committed against the Armenian cultural heritage..."¹².

Modern structures and monuments also do not remain aloof from the vandal actions of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has destroyed a memorial monument erected behind the Khachatur Abovyan school in Shushi, and a monument to Charles Aznavour was destroyed on the territory of the Charles Aznavour Stepanakert Cultural Center. On the right, it was stopped on May 18-22, 2022, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the world-famous singer. Azerbaijan continues the process of de-Armenianization of Stepanakert. The buildings of the National Assembly of Artsakh and the Union of Soldiers-Liberators were demolished (Fig.7).



a.



b.

Fig. 7. The buildings of the National Assembly of Artsakh in Stepanakert:
a. before the war, b. after the war of 2024¹³

It should be noted that in accordance with the 1954 Hague Convention prohibiting the Destruction of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict, the prescription (old or new) or the nature of the monument cannot serve as a basis for justifying the destruction¹⁴.

It is of utmost importance to emphasize that the International Court of Justice has confirmed that the laws in force in the occupied territories, including provisions for the protection of cultural values, have attained the status of international customary law (as per jurisprudence). This means that these laws serve as universal and binding rules for all states¹⁵.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in the occupied territories of Artsakh during the 44-day war and the following four years is weighty evidence to consider the displacement of the people of Artsakh by Azerbaijan as "forcible." Let's give just a few facts. They are: the destruction of the Church of Surb Astvatsatsin in Jebrayil (Mekhakavan), the destruction and distortion of the dome of the Holy Savior (Surb Amenaprkich) Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi, the destruction and complete demolition of the dome and bell tower of the Hovhannes Mkrtich Church, the destruction of the "Revival" khachkar in the village of Hadrut Arakel, the complete destruction of the Surb Sargis Church in the village of Mokhrenes, the destruction of the monument dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Armenian Genocide in Shushi, the destruction of the "Resurrected Talish" monuments in the village of Talish, the destruction of the historical cemeteries of Shushi and Sghnakh, the disappearance of 51 sculptures from the "Garden of Sculptures" attached to the State Museum of Fine Arts of Shushi, the desecration of the churches of Dadivank, the Surb Khach Monastery of Hadrut, the

¹² Available at: <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>. (accessed on November 1, 2024).

¹³ Photo source: <https://monumentwatch.org/hy/alerts/>.

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=31415> (accessed on October 2, 2024).

¹⁵ International Court of Justice, application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Armenia v. Azerbaijan), December 7, 2021, No. 2021/34).

Surb Astvatsatsin of Tsakuri, the Surb Yeghishe of Mataghis, the Surb Hovhannes of Togh, the desecration of the function of Armenian churches by representatives of the Udi community, etc. In Stepanakert, the statues of Stepan Shahumyan and Alexander Myasnikyan, the memorial stone of Ashot Ghulyan, the monument of Artsvi in the upper part of Stepanakert, and the statue of Charles Aznavour in the Armenian-French park were destroyed; the cemeteries of Hadrut were damaged; the 7th-century church of Vankasar was desecrated and its cross removed; Surb Sargis of the Tsar was destroyed; the khachkars of the medieval churches of Surb Grigor with their unique inscriptions were demolished; and the village of Mokhrenes with its Surb Astvatsatsin Church was leveled. The two khachkars of the monument-spring of Aghanus village and the monument of Getavan were destroyed; the Azeriization and Turkification program of historical Hadrut was initiated; the Islamization program of Shushi was launched; and the new program called "Western Azerbaijan," which covers the current territory of Armenia, was activated. These and many other actions are classified as war crimes under the conventions and international regulations of UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Sooner or later, Azerbaijan will be held accountable for these actions¹⁶.

Conclusion

Summarizing and evaluating the confirmed situation of preservation of the architectural heritage of Artsakh, we state that this heritage is facing a mortal danger. The main directions of damage caused to the architectural heritage by Azerbaijan have been singled out:

1. Physical destruction during the wars and in the occupied territories (St. Hovhannes Mkrtych in Shushi, St. Zoravor Church in Mekhakavan, St. Sargis Church in Mokhrenes village, khachkars, and tombstones).
2. Appropriation (Albanization, Azeriization, Russification, etc.) (Dadivank, Gandzasar Monastery, Yeghisha Arakel Monastery, Tsitsernavank, Shushi St. Amenprkitch Ghazanchetsots, Tsakuri St. Astvatsatsin, Hadrut St. Cross churches).
3. Desecration, robbery, change of function (St. Yeghisha Church of Mataghis, St. Astvatsatsin Church of Tsakuri (Tsaghkavank), churches of the Kusanats desert, Kataro monastery).

It should also be noted that the way to face and respond to the modern challenges of preservation of the architectural heritage of Artsakh is to consider them from the point of view of international law, based on the statutes of heritage preservation.

It is also confirmed that any heritage is a universal value and that its protection and management are anti-national, and its violation is a serious crime committed against the entire civilized world and punishable by relevant laws.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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¹⁶ Available at: <https://monumentwatch.org/> (accessed on November 4, 2024).

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