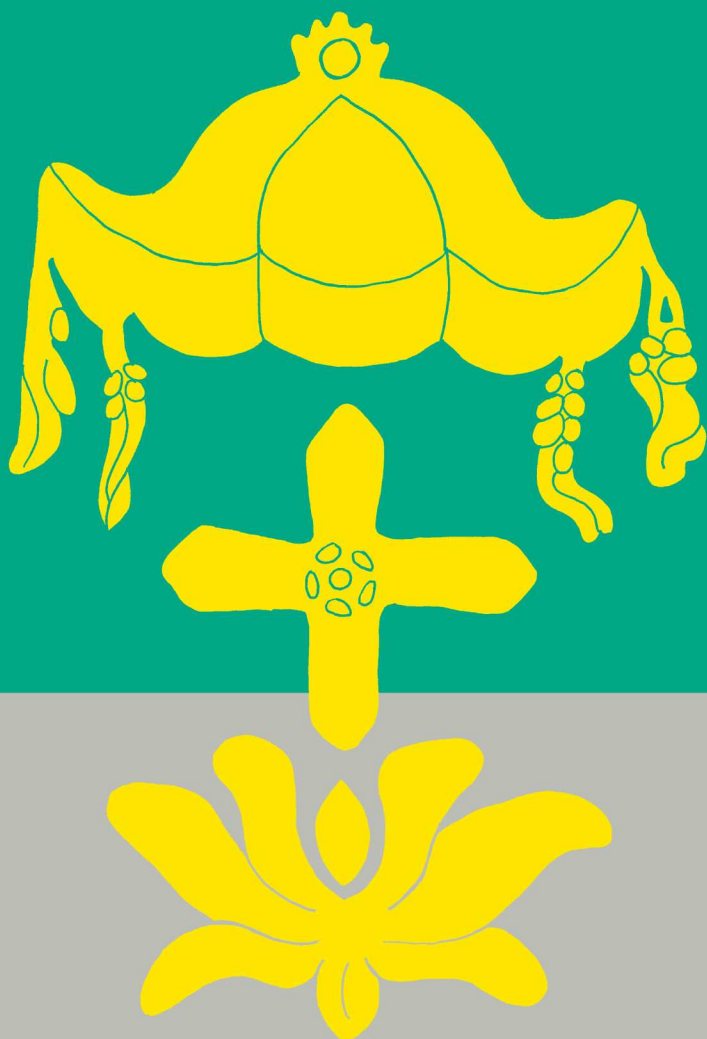


Edited by Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev
and Haroutioun Khatchadourian

Monuments and Identities in the Caucasus

*Karabagh, Nakhichevan and Azerbaijan
in Contemporary Geopolitical Conflict*



TSEC VOL XXXI

BRILL

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Azerbaijan's Policy of Extortion and Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Arts'akh

Hamlet Petrosyan, Anna Leyloyan-Yekmalyan, Haykuhi Muradyan and Armine Tigranyan

The seizure of the Armenian cultural heritage of Arts'akh is carried out in Azerbaijan by outwardly rigid but internally flexible mechanisms. The first section of the article presents and discusses the various mechanisms used by Azerbaijani academics and political authorities. The second section examines the cases, directions and mechanisms of extortion of cultural patrimony during the 44-day war in 2020 and in its aftermath. The third section presents the initiatives aimed at preserving the monuments of Arts'akh.

1 Historical Roots and Mechanisms of Extortion¹

The Azerbaijani identity was constructed during the Soviet period.² It was created on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, legalized through the Soviet policy of defining ethno-national identities and legitimized through the myth of ancient autochthonous origins while distorting the history of the ancient Media, Atropatene and Caucasian Albania (Aġuank'), as well as Armenia's historical regions of Utik', Arts'akh and Nakhichevan. Since the population of the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan was extremely heterogenous, the creation of a new ethno-national unit, possessed of a single 'titular' nation, i.e. the Turkic speaking Azerbaijanis, became a fertile soil for expansionist ambitions (including over the Armenian regions of Siunik' and Gelark'unik'), as well as the ambition to assimilate ethnic and religious minorities, including Kurds, Udis, Lezgis, Tats and numerous other ethno-religious groups enrooted on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan.³

1 This section has been translated from Armenian into English by Simon Maghakyan and edited by Sarah Pickman. The authors express their gratitude to them.

2 V. Shnirelman, *Войны памяти. Мифы, идентичность и политика в Закавказье* [*Wars of memory: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia*], M., 2003, pp. 119–165.

3 This status-based ranking of ethnicity, implying titular and non-titular ethnic groups in Azerbaijan, is analysed by Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism*, New York, 2020.

It is widely documented that this policy's ultimate political goal was to present the Azeris as indigenous people and the heirs of ancient peoples that had lived in what Azerbaijani nationalists refer to as 'Northern Azerbaijan' (i.e. former Soviet Azerbaijan) and 'Southern Azerbaijan' (northern Iran). The Medes, notably, have long since vanished, while Atropatene lay outside the Soviet borders, in Iran.⁴ Nobody thus could protest against historical revisionism, while the main heirs of Caucasian Albania, the Udi people, were few in number, divided along linguistic and religious lines, and legally and politically weak. Subsequent developments demonstrated that the Armenians, who were historically, religiously and culturally close to the Caucasian Albanians, were unwilling to defend the cultural rights of their almost vanished neighbours, the Udis, even though the Caucasian Albanian identity was deeply intertwined with Armenian history and culture.⁵ The biggest hurdle to Azerbaijan's policy of constructing a new identity and ancestral homeland were the numerous Armenians and their cultural monuments, landmarks and artefacts, which were dispersed across the territory of Azerbaijan, with a significant concentration in Arts'akh, Utik' and Nakhichevan.⁶

As a result of the politics of Sovietization, which involved forced annexation of Arts'akh to Azerbaijan and State-sanctioned atheism, the indigenous Armenian population of Arts'akh loosened its grip on the foci of its cultural identity (save for the more secular practices of a distinct dialect, ceremonies without overt religious undertones and some folk traditions). In other words, cultural heritage no longer functioned as an agent enabling the preservation of cultural identity. Under these conditions, Azerbaijan's attack on Armenian monuments did not meet serious resistance. The forced misattribution of monuments was, at first, conducted through the officially propagated atheism, when propaganda and deliberate destruction went hand-in-hand.⁷ The semi-nomadic cattle-breeding populations, which represented the predominant part of the Muslim Turkish speaking population of the South Caucasus, suffered fewer losses of historical monuments in the USSR than the agriculturalist Christian population whose material patrimony could now be physically 'reduced' in order to match the low number of Islamic monuments.

4 Today, this region is located in the north-west of Iran and is called Azerbaijan.

5 On the Udis and on the genesis of the 'Albanian' construct, see I. Dorfmann-Lazarev's chapter in this volume (sections 7–10).

6 See H. Khatchadourian's chapter and maps 14.11 and 14.12 (p. 460) in this volume.

7 H. Petrosyan, 'Ethnocide in Arts'akh: The Mechanisms of Azerbaijan's Usurpation of Indigenous Armenian Cultural Heritage, Cultural Heritage Experience & Perspectives In International Context', in *Proceedings Of The Rochemp Center International Conference 23rd–24th of January 2020*, Yerevan, pp. 79–90.



FIGURE 13.1 *Khach'k'ars* and tombstones destroyed and reused, Julfa, photos: 'Monument Watch'

The implementation of the atheist programme was aimed to alter popular culture and the popular perception of historical heritage. Its most dangerous outcome was the downgrading of historical monuments to something unworthy of protection, even translating official atheism into an active campaign against monuments. First and foremost, this policy entailed the destruction, deformation and re-adaptation of Armenian architectural structures, inscriptions, *khach'k'ars* and tombstones (Figure 13.1, 13.2, 13.3) by Azerbaijani authorities. As a result, hundreds of churches in Arts'akh were converted to storage locations or, in the best case, 'Houses of Culture'. For instance, the monastery in Ch'arek'tar, at least since the 1960s, functioned as a home and a barn of an Azerbaijani family (Figure 13.4, 13.5). However, the demolition of hundreds of churches⁸ and the destruction of *khach'k'ars*, sometimes even used as construction material,⁹ was the most important blow to the Armenian cultural landscape of Arts'akh and the surrounding regions populated by Armenians since antiquity. It must be noted that communists, irrespective of their origin, participated in this destructive campaign in the name of atheism. The mistreatment of monuments deprived them of their aura

8 Petrosyan, *Ethnocide in Arts'akh*, p. 80.

9 See an example in S. Karapetyan, *Azerbaijan out of Civilization*, RAA, 2017, Yerevan, 2017, p. 84.



FIGURE 13.2 Tombstone destroyed and reused, photos: 'Monument Watch'

of sacredness, reducing them to simple decorations and heavily affecting a society with ancient origins.

One of the methods used for imposing atheism in the USSR was the elimination of references to Christianity in the description of culture. The classic example of this policy is the work of the Russian ethnographer Ilya P. Petrushevskii (1898–1977), which was published in 1930 and which bears a transparent title: *О дохристианских верованиях крестьян Нагорного Карабаха*, i.e. 'Concerning the pre-Christian Beliefs of the Peasants of Nagornyi Karabakh'. Notably, 'Armenians' have been replaced by 'peasants', thus insinuating that the Muslims Tatars had the same pre-Christian roots in the region. Atheism was the primary cause compelling Petrushevskii to 'secularize' Christian references in his writing. For instance, he claims that 'folk wedding traditions have survived. In particular, before the bride would leave for her new house, the ritual of the bride's worship of her paternal house's ground oven—*t'onir*—takes place, which, peasants say, is more sacred and important than the church itself. For the Armenian peasant, the wedding ritual is essentially the worship of the oven (the source of survival) and not a Christian rite.'¹⁰ In fact, the 'veneration of

¹⁰ I. Petrushevskii, *О дохристианских верованиях крестьян Нагорного Карабаха* [*About the pre-Christian beliefs of the Peasants of Nagornyi Karabakh*], Baku, 1930, p. 4. The



FIGURE 13.3 Destroyed *khach'kar* and tombstones, photos: 'Monument Watch'.

state-endorsed thesis, according to which 'cultural commonality' was stronger between Armenians and Azeris than between other ethnic groups in Soviet Azerbaijan, has recently been analysed by V.A. Safaryan, *Освещение древней и средневековой культуры Арцаха в азербайджанской исторической науке* [*Interpretation of ancient and medieval culture of Arts'akh in Azerbaijani historical science*], PhD Thesis in History, Stepanakert/Yerevan, 2009, p. 17.



FIGURE 13.4 Monastery in Ch'arek'tar partially re-adapted, photos: 'Monument Watch'



FIGURE 13.5 Monastery in Ch'arek'tar partially re-adapted, photos: 'Monument Watch'

the oven' was usually practiced in villages without churches.¹¹ Petrushevskii's factual errors should furthermore be noted. For example, he lumps together *ōdjakh* and *t'onir*, creating the combined term *ōdjakh-t'onir*, while in Arts'akh, *ōdjakh* was the fireplace within the house and *t'onir* the oven outside. Petrushevskii's statement implies that he did not categorize holy *ōdjakh* among sacred sites, even though he had encountered them in the course of his fieldwork.

In addition to the secularization of Christian traditions, another mechanism intended to neutralize the Armenian identity of Arts'akh was the discovery of 'overlapping histories'. Since the cultural differences between Christian Armenians and Tatar (Azeri) Muslims were apparent, a mechanism of cultural usurpation—under the guise of internationalism and the 'brotherhood of nations'—was introduced through the claims to cultural 'kinship', 'common roots' and 'affinities'. Thus, Petrushevskii claims that for the Karabakh Armenians the Christian holy sites and rituals were less important than their pre-Christian folk traditions. Stretching this thesis even further, the author also argues that as far as the pre-Christian/folk traditions are concerned, the cultural foundations of the Armenians and the Tatars [Azeris] are almost identical. To demonstrate this, he claims that the legends and the worship of Christian sacred sites are identical for the Armenians and the Azeris: 'It must be noted that the Turkish [Azeri] and Armenian peasant's beliefs show more similarities and proximity to each other than to the beliefs of the elite Muslims and Christians.'¹²

Unsurprisingly, the same approach would later be adopted by the Azeri scholar Zia Buniyatov (1923–1997) but then with the aim of claiming a common *ethnic* ancestry of both peoples. According to Buniyatov, the rituals and customs of the Armenians of various regions (Arts'akh, Siunik', Gardman, Kutkashēn, Ismail, etc.) were surprisingly similar to the customs of their Azeri neighbours; this, supposedly, demonstrates that the contemporary Armenians of Karabagh and the Azerbaijanis both descend from the Caucasian Albanians, some of whom have joined the Armenian Church and have been 'assimilated', while others have become Muslims.¹³ The same approach was adopted in order to assimilate, by noting random similarities, Armenian architectural culture with late medieval Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan. As we can see, the next

11 H. Petrosyan, Քարաբլուրի նորագյուտ սրբարանը և «սուրբ օջախների» պաշտամունքըն Արցախում [The newly discovered sanctuary in K'arablur and worship of a sacred fireplaces in Arts'akh], in *Armenian Saints and Sanctuaries*, Yerevan, 2001, pp. 347–356.

12 Petrushevskii, *About the pre-Christian beliefs*, p. 2.

13 Z.M. Buniyatov, *Азербайджан в VII–IX вв.* [Azerbaijan in VII–IX cc], Baku, 1965, p. 100.

step is not that far: if the cultures are so intertwined, then one can conclude that the authors of the ancient monuments possessed the same origins and the same cultural identity.¹⁴

Another mechanism, which has an administrative and political dimension, is what may be called a state monopoly over cultural studies. This means that the history and culture of the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, including Arts'akh, could only be studied in Azerbaijani academic institutions. Such studies were placed under a strict control of the Communist Party authorities. Local Armenian scholars were persecuted, and sometimes deported, for attempting to study the history and culture of their ancestral homeland. I recall, for instance, a research trip in company with Bagrat Ulubabyan, Shahen Mkrtchyan and Zhan Andryan to Arts'akh villages in 1977, with the aim of documenting *khach'k'ars*; in some villages open resistance was encountered on the part of school directors who argued that Hamlet Petrosyan needed a written permit to be issued by the local Party authorities in order to photograph *khach'k'ars*.

Petrosyan's PhD supervisor, the academician Babken Arak'elyan (1912–2004), once commented that all his initiatives to establish cooperation with the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences had remained fruitless. In his eyes, the only, meagre, success was the agreement achieved in the 1960s, which allowed Armenian scholars to document medieval Armenian inscriptions in Arts'akh/Karabakh under the supervision of Sedrak Barkhudaryan (1898–1970), while also allowing Azerbaijani scholars to document Arabic-script inscriptions in Armenia under the supervision of Məşədixanım Neymatova (1924–2016). Tellingly, both Barkhudaryan's¹⁵ and Neymatova's¹⁶ books were published much later, in the early 1980s. While the first research had only documented Armenian inscriptions, Neymatova's findings also included inscriptions found on the tombs of Islamized Armenians, amongst them descendants of the famed Ōrbēlean family, which in the book were unhesitatingly presented as Azerbaijanis. These Moscow-backed policies hindered the training of Armenian specialists for fieldwork. For instance, the departments of Armenian studies were unable to accustom specialists to the Caucasian Albanian alphabet, entirely consigning this field of studies to neighbouring Georgia. The recent discovery of Caucasian Albanian manuscripts in the monastery of Saint Catherine in

14 Safaryan, *Interpretation of ancient and medieval culture of Arts'akh*, pp. 21–68.

15 S.G. Barkhudaryan, Դիվան հայ վիմագրության, պր. 5. Արցախ (Archives of Armenian epigraphy, vol 5, Arts'akh), Yerevan, 1982.

16 M.S. Neimatova, Мемориальные памятники Азербайджана: XII–XIX века (Memorial monuments of Azerbaijan: XII–XIX centuries), Baku, 1981.

Sinai, Egypt, has revolutionized the study of Caucasian Albanian culture since: for the first time, it became possible to read Albanian textual fragments. The publications of the renowned linguist the academician Zaza Aleksidze (1935–2023) of the National Academy of Georgia show, however, a tendency to downplay the Armenians' role in the creation of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet and to highlight the role of the Georgians.¹⁷

A further Azerbaijani step consisted in inventing a terminology which would support historiographical revisionism and the usurpation of cultural heritage. Azerbaijanis proclaimed the princely dynasties that ruled on the territory of Karabagh and the adjacent territories to be Caucasian Albanian, hence Azerbaijani. Thus, the historian Movsēs Kałankatuats'i received the Turkic name of Kalankatlı. Tellingly, even the most eminent representatives of the 'Caucasian Albanian thesis' in Azerbaijan did not know Armenian. In a failed attempt to demonstrate their mastery of the primary sources, Z. Bunyatov and F. Mamedova transcribe the original Armenian text of Movsēs Kałankatuats'i with Cyrillic letters (in order to 'emancipate' the historiography of Caucasian Albania from its Armenian roots) while making numerous errors.¹⁸

The most grotesque examples of this historiography come from two Azerbaijani scholars, Davud Akhundov and Nasirullah Rzayev. In a photo-documentation of Christian monuments found on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, Akhundov lists each single item as Caucasian Albanian, hence Azerbaijani.¹⁹ With this aim, he fabricates an Azerbaijani term for the Armenian *khach'k'ars*, renaming them in Azerbaijani as 'nişandaş' or 'xaçdaş'.²⁰ Rzayev, in a book published with the approval of the Academy of sciences of the Republic by the Publishing House 'Elm' (Science), identifies the Caucasian Albanians with the Turks. Demonstrating a complete indifference to chronology, he often claims that various 'decorative motifs' found on *khach'k'ars* are Caucasian Albanian. The 18th–19th century tombstones bearing Armenian inscriptions

17 *The Albanian Script: The Process—How Its Secrets Were Revealed* by Zaza Aleksidze and Betty Blair: http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai113_folder/113_articles/113_zaza_aleksidze_secrets.html. It is noteworthy that further investigations led to the conclusion that the newly discovered Albanian texts reveal closest parallels to ancient Armenian, see: *The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsests of Mt. Sinai*, vol. 1, Turnhout, 2008, pp. xxiv, 1–34.

18 Z. Bunyatov, *Азербайджан в VII–IX вв. (Azerbaijan in 7th–9th Centuries)*, Baku, 1965, pp. 7–9, *in passim*; F. Mamedova, *Политическая история и историческая география Кавказской Албании (Political History and Historical Geography of Caucasian Albania)*, Baku, 1986, pp. 18, 41, 159, *in passim*.

19 On D. Akhundov, see also A. Auvazyan's Chapter 12 above.

20 D. Akhundov, *Архитектура древнего и раннесредневекового Азербайджана [Architecture of ancient and early medieval Azerbaijan]*, Baku, 1986, pp. 236–252.



FIGURE 13.6 Tombstone of Melik Hisē; Awetaranots', photos: 'Monument Watch'

from Awetaranots' in Arts'akh are classified indifferently as Caucasian Albanian and Oghuz-Turkish.²¹

The following epitaph inscribed in 1736 on the tombstone of Melik Hisē Ի (a son of Melik Shahnazar ԻԻ), shows all the inconsistency of the attempts at presenting *khach'k'ars* as Azeri monuments (Figure 13.6, 13.7):

Այս է տապան մելիք Շահնազարի
Որդի Մելիք Յիսէին. թվ :ՌՃՁԵ:
Ոգեմ գբանս գովելոյի
Ի վերայ Մելիք Հուսէյնի,
Զոր գրեցի այս տապանի:
Սա էր տէր երկրին Վարանդայի
:ԼԵ: մասն գելի.
Սայ էր հացով, սեղանով լի,

Ողորմէր ամեն ազգի.
Կերպարանօքն էր գովելի,
Թագ պարձանք Հայոց ազգի,

Յոյժ կողորեաց ազգէն դաջկի,
Պատերազմեաց յետ օսմանցի,
Սա ոչ ետ հարկ թագաւորի,
Ամուր պարիսպ էր աշխարհի:
Որ է եաշն թվին :ՌՃԾԸ: (1709):²²

This is the gravestone of Melik Shahnazar's
Son, Melik Hisē, 1736.
I am weaving words of praise
To Melik Husein,
Which I have written on this tomb.
He was the lord of the land of Varanda,
With thirty-five villages.
His bread never ran low, his table was
abundant,
He was merciful to every people.
His countenance was worthy of praise
his crown was the pride of the Armenian
nation,
He vigorously slaughtered many Muslims,
He fought against the Ottomans,
He paid no tax to kings.
He was a mighty wall for our country,
[The one] who was born in year 1709.

21 N.I. Rzaev, *Искусство Кавказской Албании: IV в. до н.э.–VIII в. н.э* [*Art of Caucasian Albania: IVE. BC–VIII. AD*] (in Russian), Baku, 1976.

22 *Archives of Armenian epigraphy*, vol 5 (Arts'akh), p. 149.



FIGURE 13.7
Tombstone of Melik Hisē; Awetaranots',
photos: 'Monument Watch'

2 Destruction During the Second War (2020)

Numerous cases of destruction indicate that, irrespective of the existence or absence of hostilities, Arts'akh has remained for Azerbaijan a terrain of 'cultural war'.²³ Baku has repeatedly stated that 'Armenians have never lived in Arts'akh' and that the Christian monuments of Azerbaijan are not Armenian but Albanian. At the same time, the President of Azerbaijan has publicly claimed that 'Azerbaijan will restore its territorial integrity using a military

23 K. Chainoglou, *The Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict: Dissolving the Boundaries between the Existing Legal Regimes?* "Santander Art and Culture Law Review", 2/2017 (3), pp. 109–134.

option'.²⁴ During the war that began on 27 September 2020, Armenian monuments of Arts'akh were attacked by irregular shelling and bombardment. One of the conspicuous cases of destruction is the church of Zōrawor Surb Astuatatsin (Mighty Holy Mother of God) in Mekhakawan (Cəbrayıl), which came under the supervision of Azerbaijan after the armistice.²⁵ It was already desecrated by Azerbaijani soldiers before its complete destruction.²⁶ Immediately after the armistice, the Kanach' Zham church in Shushi was blown up, the dome and the belfry were damaged. Today, the Azerbaijanis deny that this church is Armenian, refusing to acknowledge that the current intrusion on the site is actually intended to transform the building into a structure resembling a Russian church.²⁷ Also the cross-shaped monument in the village of Şükürbəyli, region of Cəbrayıl,²⁸ has been destroyed; the *khach'k'ar* in the village of Arak'el, region of Hadrut, has been destroyed.²⁹

Among the monuments destroyed are not only Christian monuments and artefacts (churches, *khach'k'ars*, inscriptions), but also every sign of Armenian presence on the territory, ancient or recent. Thus, the Tigranakert Archaeological Camp was shelled, as was the Shushi House of Culture. A memorial to the victims of the Armenian Genocide has been demolished in Shushi.³⁰ Other monuments have been destroyed or vandalised.³¹ In the occupied vil-

24 For the conclusions of an expert group of the Chamber of Advocates of the Republic of Armenia that studied aspects of international law pertaining to the Republic of Arts'akh, see "Professional opinion on the Arts'akh conflict and violations of international law committed by the Republic of Azerbaijan", Yerevan, 2017, p. 15; see also https://advocates.am/images/haytararutyunneri_fayler/2017/Masnagitakan_kartsiq.pdf (15.12.2020).

25 *Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56530604> (21.06.2021):

26 See <https://monumentwatch.org/en/?s=zoravor> (07.02.2023).

27 "Azerbaijanis destroyed the dome and bell tower of the Kanach Zham church", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/azerbaijanis-destroyed-the-dome-and-bell-tower-of-the-kanach-zham-church/> (21.06.2021); "Presentation of the Kanach Zham as Russian Orthodox Church and illegal rites performed there", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/presentation-of-the-kanach-zham-as-russian-orthodox-church-and-illegal-rites-performed-there/>; cf. P. Donabédian's chapter 5, p. 125 in this volume.

28 *İşğaldan azad olunan Cəbrayıl rayonunun Şükürbəyli kəndi, Azərbaycan Respublikası Müdafiə Nazirliyi*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuJ0-bxibvU> (21.08.2021):

29 Foreign Ministry of Republic of Armenia spokesperson Anna Naghdalyan tweeted, <https://twitter.com/naghdalyan/status/1348922661318103040> (20.08.2021):

30 "Destruction of the Memorial Devoted to the Genocide victims in Shushi", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/destruction-of-the-memorial-devoted-to-the-genocide-victims-in-shushi/> (21.06.2021):

31 See <https://monumentwatch.org/en/?s=Tevan+Stepanyan> (07.02.2023); "Շուշիում պղծել են Սպարապետի հուշարձանը" ("The monument of Commander was desecrated in

lage of Azokh, region of Hadrut, not only memorials to the victims of the First Arts'akh War and the Armenian Genocide have been destroyed but also that to the victims of the Great Patriotic War because the names written on the memorial were Armenian.³² In his native village of Mets T'aler, region of Hadrut, the bust of the USSR aviator Marshal Armenak Khanperiyants (Sergei Khudyakov) has been destroyed because of the marshal's Armenian name.³³ In Shushi, for the same reason, the bust of the Soviet statesman Hovhannes (Ivan) Tevosyan has been destroyed.³⁴ Also the Shushi Geological Museum³⁵ has been destroyed and fifty-one sculptures from the 'Park of Sculptures' adjacent to the Shushi State Museum of Fine Arts have disappeared.³⁶ The memorial 'Revived T'alish' in the village of T'alish, district of Martakert, has been destroyed.³⁷

Using the pretext of creating new infrastructures in the occupied territories, Baku is eliminating traces of ancient historical settlements, which gave witness to the millennial habitation of Armenians in the region. Thus, a new building was erected on the place of a historical cemetery of Shushi.³⁸ The cemetery of

Shushi"), <https://yerkirmedia.am/hy/article/2020/11/18/27728/> (18.11.2020); "Ադրբեյջանական զոււն շարունակում է «պատերազմը» հայկական պատմամշակութային ժառանգության դէմ, նշում է ազն-ն" ("The Azerbaijani Armed Forces continue the "war" against the Armenian historical and cultural heritage, the Foreign Ministry said"), <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/30959075.html> (19.11.2020); "Destruction of the memorial to the soldiers in Hadrut", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/destruction-of-the-memorial-devoted-to-the-genocide-victims-in-shushi/> (02.08.2021); "Church and memorial desecration in post-ceasefire Nagorno Karabakh", <https://medium.com/dfrlab/church-and-memorial-desecration-in-post-ceasefire-nagorno-karabakh-87ece968af3f> (20.08.2021).

32 "Азербайджан разрушил мемориальный комплекс в Вов и Первой Арцахской войны в Азохе", Военные Преступления Азербайджана, <https://war.karabakhrecords.info/ru/2021/08/18/azerbaijan-destroyed-the-memorial-complex-of-the-second-world-war-and-the-first-Arts'akh-war-in-azokh/> (20.08.2021).

33 "Destruction of the Bust of Armenak Khanperiyants and MIG-17 Fighter Jet in Mets Tagher Village",

<https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/destruction-of-the-bust-of-armenak-khanperiyant-s-and-mig-17-fighter-jet-in-mets-tagher-village/> (21.08.2021).

34 "Շուշիում ադրբեյջանցի վանդալները պղծել են Հովհաննես Թևոսյանի կիսանդրին" (Azerbaijani vandals desecrated the bust of Hovhannes Tevosyan in Shushi), <https://armeniasputnik.am/karabah/20210304/26685429/shushi-vandalizm-xshm-gorcich-hovhannes-tevosyan.html> (04.03.2021).

35 Ararathau user's telegram video link: <https://t.me/ararathau/9676> (20.08.2021).

36 "Քանդակների պուրակի բացումը Շուշիում" ("Opening of a sculpture park in Shushi"), <https://www.Arts'akhtert.com/arm/index.php/culture-and-education/item/27159-2019-07-22-16-02-03> (20.08.2021).

37 See Kirill Krivosheev's publication of 3 December 2020: <https://archive.is/PkeTz> (21.08.2021).

38 This acts of vandalism is evidenced by satellite photos taken by Caucasus Heritage Watch.

the village of Mets T'aler, region of Hadrut, has been levelled to the ground, the eighteenth-century Armenian cemetery of Sēhnakh in the community of Shosh, region of Askeran, has completely been destroyed³⁹ on a terrain where a tunnel is now being built.⁴⁰

The changing of the function of ancient sanctuaries is another form of destruction. Numerous examples can be quoted. The Kataro church in the village of Toł, region of Hadrut, has been turned into a military shelter by Azerbaijani armed forces.⁴¹ The churches of Surb Astuatsatsin⁴² and of Surb Elisha in the village Djërałats'ner, region of Askeran, have been turned into Muslim chapels.

Another form of destruction practised in Karabagh is the assimilation of heritage. Firstly, Armenian monuments are declared Albanian, then the facts are hidden under the cover of bogus restorations and reconstructions. The result is always the loss of the authenticity of a monument. Examples of this are the deformation of the church in the village of Tsakuri,⁴³ the declaration of the famous monastery Dadivank' as Albanian, the falsification of Armenian inscriptions and *khach'k'ars*, the pretended 'restoration' of the church of the Holy Saviour (Łazanch'ets'ots') in Shushi,⁴⁴ which alters its form, and the mock 'construction' works near the mansion of T'ukhnakal.⁴⁵

Examples of desecration and looting are afforded by the church of Surb Elisha, built in 1892–1898 in the north-western part of Mataghis/Matalis, the destruction of icons by the Azerbaijani military⁴⁶ and the desecration of a memorial in the occupied village of Aknabıur (Aknaghbyur).⁴⁷

39 "Destruction of the cemetery of Sēghnakh", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/destruction-of-the-cemetery-of-syghnakh/> (21.06.2021).

40 "Единая транспортная концепция Карабаха" (*Unified transport concept of Karabakh*), СВС TV Azerbaijan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSPsWr5Ftog> (21.08.2021).

41 "The Usage of the Church of Kataro Monastery for Military Purposes", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/the-usage-of-the-church-of-kataro-monastery-for-military-purposes/> (21.06.2021).

42 With the publication of Ararat on the "Telegram" channel, <https://t.me/ararathau/8515> (19.06.2021).

43 "The statement of the president of Azerbaijan on the church of Tsakuri", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/the-statement-of-the-president-of-azerbaijan-on-the-church-of-tsakuri/> (21.06.2021).

44 "Illegal restorations of St. Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi", <https://monumentwatch.org/monitoring-alerts/> (21.06.2021).

45 Satellite photos taken by Caucasus Heritage Watch, <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/?s=Tukhnakal> (15.12.2020).

46 "Cultural vandalism in St. Yeghisha church of Mataghis", <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/cultural-vandalism-in-st-yeghisha-church-of-mataghis/> (21.06.2021).

47 "Aknakhbyur: Desecration of the Memorial to the Victims of the First Arts'akh War",

As we know, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are signatories of conventions and treaties for the protection of cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict, while Arts'akh is not. In this case, the customary norms of protection of cultural heritage⁴⁸ and international humanitarian law are applicable.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, they have failed to protect the cultural patrimony of Arts'akh.

3 Protection against Propaganda

The most famous example of the targeting of Armenian cultural monuments by the Azerbaijani armed forces during the war is the already mentioned shelling of the cathedral of the Holy Saviour (Łazanch'ets'ots') in Shushi (Figure 13.8). The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia officially appealed⁵⁰ to international organizations to condemn this act of vandalism and to take preventive measures to protect the cultural heritage of Arts'akh.⁵¹ In response to this statement, on 9 October 2020 UNESCO issued a statement expressing deep concern over the escalation of violence 'in the conflict zone of Nagornyi Karabakh'. It urged all sides to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, notably under the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols (of 1954 and 1999) intended to ensure the prevention of damage to cultural heritage in all its forms.⁵² It should be noted that, as before, also in this case the UNESCO statement was addressed to both parties to the conflict, while it is obvious that the targeted destruction of cultural patrimony was organized by the Azerbaijani authorities. In

<https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/destruction-alteration-modification-of-cultural-heritage-of-aknaghbyur/> (21.06.2021).

- 48 Humanitarian law is a part of international law, the primary purpose of which is to protect the life of individuals and consequently the expression of a person's creative thought—cultural heritage; see J. Toman, *The Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, Aldershot, 1996.
- 49 See Alessandro Chechi's and Francesco Romani's contribution in this volume.
- 50 Interview with L. Karakhanyan, the Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Arts'akh, 25.10.2020.
- 51 Cultural vandalism: The St. All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church of Shushi is bombarded, <https://escs.am/am/news/7277>.
- 52 Situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone UNESCO statement, <https://en.unesco.org/news/situation-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-zone-unesco-statement> 09.10.2020.



FIGURE 13.8 Cathedral of the Holy Saviour (Łazanch'ets'ots'), Shushi, photos: 'Monument Watch'

the same way, also the World Monument Fund (WMF) addressed the bombing of the Łazanch'ets'ots' church in Arts'akh, calling the deliberate destruction of any cultural heritage site unacceptable.⁵³ The periodical 'Art Newspaper' also referred to the rocket fire on Shushi Cathedral. In the article it is stated that although Azerbaijan has denied targeting historical, cultural and religious monuments, it is an obvious fact that an Armenian church was targeted.⁵⁴ On 16 October 2020, a number of famous scholars, including N. Chomsky, G. Spivak, T. Ali, V. Berberyan, Ju. Herman, Q. West and S. Benhabib, published an open letter, in which they expressed their concern to preserve the endangered cultural patrimony of Arts'akh and the imperative of the international community to act for its protection:⁵⁵

It is an obvious fact that after signing on 9 November a ceasefire agreement, the vandalism of monuments and cultural institutions on the territories under Azerbaijani control has become more intense. Evidence

53 The World Monument Fund condemns the targeting of St. Ghazanchetsots, <https://escs.am/am/news/7291>.

54 Armenian monuments in line of fire in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/monuments-in-line-of-fire-in-nagorno-karabakh-conflict>.

55 A Call for Lasting Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/short-takes/lasting-peace-nagorno-karabakh/>.

of this are the videos regularly posted in the Azerbaijani press,⁵⁶ where Armenian sites are destroyed or profaned by conquerors. The increase in the number of such cases has worried international organizations and institutions who are concerned with cultural preservation. On November 20, 2020, General-Director of UNESCO Audrey Azoulay issued a statement expressing readiness to send technical assistance and a mission to Arts'akh to get acquainted with the historical, cultural and religious heritage and to outline the necessary steps for its preservation, to which Azerbaijan has not yet given its agreement.⁵⁷

A number of Armenian civil society organizations have applied to UNESCO for the protection of Armenian monuments in Arts'akh.⁵⁸ The platform 'Monument Watch' (Monitoring of Arts'akh Cultural Heritage)⁵⁹ was initiated by Hamlet Petrosyan (Yerevan State University) and Anna Leyloyan-Yekmalyan (State Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, INaLCO, Paris) in May 2021. It is an independent academic platform that records the state of the cultural heritage of Artsakh and documents the events of destruction and alteration of monuments. As of 12 February 2023, more than one hundred and ninety monuments of those that have remained in the territories occupied by Azerbaijan have been registered on the platform. The Section 'Alerts' of the website contains examples of destruction, misappropriation and desecration. Ninety cases have already been documented in it, but their number, unfortunately, is growing.⁶⁰

Another initiative, Caucasus Heritage Watch,⁶¹ was launched in June 2021 in Cornell University, USA. Its aim is to investigate and document past and future damage to the cultural patrimony of Arts'akh with the use of satellite photography. The instances of destruction documented provide proof of State-sponsored negations and falsifications, which place historical monuments at the centre of a political conflict.

56 Alarming materials have been published here:

<https://monumentwatch.org/monitoring-alerts/>.

57 UNESCO is awaiting Azerbaijan's Response regarding Nagorno-Karabakh mission:

<https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-awaiting-azerbaijans-response-regarding-nagorno-karabakh-mission>.

58 Armenian Civil Society NGOs Call on UNESCO to Protect Armenian Cultural Heritage in Arts'akh:

<https://hetq.am/en/article/129362>.

59 Monument Watch (<https://monumentwatch.org/>).

60 <https://monumentwatch.org/monument/holy-all-savior-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/>; Alerts <https://monumentwatch.org/alerts/>.

61 <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/>.

The 44-day war reaffirmed that Azerbaijan's 'territorial aspirations' were not an end in themselves but are aimed at cleansing Arts'akh of Armenians and at destroying their cultural heritage. Azerbaijan targets not only churches, monasteries and *khach'k'ars* but also cultural and artistic sites created in the recent past, including memorials and museums. The damage caused to cultural patrimony thus becomes pervasive, undermining every possibility of preserving it as part of the life of a society and precluding its transmission to future generations. And here a question arises: How can a society protect its cultural identity and memory if, owing to the lack of international recognition of its political borders, it cannot make recourse to international policy of protection of cultural monuments? This question becomes particularly urgent when a society, such as the Arts'akh society today, is living through an on-going loss of its monuments, memorial landmarks and artefacts.

This is the first multidisciplinary volume whose focus is on the barely accessible highlands between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and their invaluable artistic heritage. Numerous ancient and mediaeval monuments of Artsakh/Karabagh and Nakhichevan find themselves in the crucible of a strife involving mutually exclusive national accounts. They are gravely endangered today by the politics of cultural destruction endorsed by the modern state of Azerbaijan.

This volume contains seventeen contributions by renowned scholars from eight nations, rare photographic documentation and a detailed inventory of all the monuments discussed. Part 1 explores the historical geography of these lands and their architecture. Part 2 analyses the development of Azerbaijani nationalism against the background of the centuries-long geopolitical contest between Russia and Turkey. Part 3 documents the loss of monuments and examines them in the light of international law governing the protection of cultural heritage.

A work of enduring value for the understanding of historical societies, the identification of what threatens a society, and the practicalities involved in the preservation of memory ... This book offers to its readers the possibility of learning about research in action, about how to take action through scholarship.

– Professor Vincent Duclert, École des hautes études en sciences sociales.

Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, PhD (2002) and Habilitation (2009) at ÉPHÉ, Sorbonne, is lecturer in Oriental Languages at Sofia University. Author of 2 monographs and numerous articles on Armenia, he has also edited *Sharing Myths, Texts and Sanctuaries in the South Caucasus: Apocryphal Themes in Literatures, Arts and Cults from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Leuven 2022).

Haroutioun Khatchadourian is an independent researcher interested in the protection of historical heritage. He has studied the History of Armenian Arts at INALCO, Paris, and is co-author of two books, *L'art des khatchkars. Les pierres à croix arméniennes d'Ispahan et de Jérusalem* (Paris 2014 and Yerevan 2019) and *Localités et biens culturels arméniens dans la Turquie ottomane. Un patrimoine en destruction* (Paris 2016).

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