

# Cultural Erasure in the Modern Day: The Destruction of Armenian Heritage Sites in Azerbaijan

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## Overview

With the war in Ukraine still raging, the world has become reacquainted with the unresolved conflicts within the former Soviet Union. One such conflict involves the Nagorno-Karabakh region, a *de jure* territory of Azerbaijan that is largely administered by the self-declared, majority ethnically Armenian “Republic of Artsakh.” Two recent wars were fought over the region, in the early 1990s and in 2020. This conflict has become fundamental to the development of national identity in both countries: Billboards in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku declare that “Karabakh is Azerbaijan” and protests in Armenia’s Yerevan reject any concession of Artsakhi land.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> An often-overlooked consequence of this conflict is the destruction of cultural heritage sites—particularly Armenian ones within Azerbaijani-held territory—as a means to rewrite regional history to conform with modern borders. Thanks to the efforts of Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), a research initiative led by archeologists from Cornell and Purdue Universities, there is now significant documentation of an active effort to dismantle Armenian cultural history. This wide-spread destruction has taken place since at least the late 1990s, primarily in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, eliminating millennia of artifacts and altering the ethnic and cultural makeup of the region in a manner that may constitute cultural genocide.

## Why are Armenia and Azerbaijan fighting?

Nagorno-Karabakh and neighboring regions have been historically populated by both Armenians, who are predominantly Armenian Apostolic Christians, and Azerbaijanis, who are predominantly Shia Muslims. As in much of the former Soviet Union, these two communities have been historically intertwined. Prior to World War One, the two ethnicities were not segregated into fully defined “regions,” with neighboring villages and towns subscribing to different religions, customs, and traditions.<sup>3</sup> The incompatibility of this cultural heterogeneity with the idea of the nation-state manifested itself when Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence from the Russian Empire in 1918. The two fledgling countries immediately fought a war over Nagorno-Karabakh, Nakhchivan, and the Zangezur region—a conflict that ended with the Red Army’s invasion of the Southern Caucasus in 1920. The issue was settled when Moscow granted most of Zangezur to Armenia and categorized Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh as “autonomous” regions of Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> While these regions’ demographics have changed over time, they remained culturally diverse in population and/or heritage throughout most of the twentieth century. In the 1926 Soviet census, Nagorno-Karabakh was reported to be approximately 89.2% Armenian.<sup>6</sup> This Armenian majority remained through 1989, when the region was home to 145,593 Armenians (76.4%), 42,871 Azerbaijanis (22.4%), and a variety of other groups such as Russians, Kurds, Greeks, and Assyrians.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, driven by factors such as the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian-Azerbaijani War, and the population redistributions during the Soviet era, the Armenian population of Nakhchivan fell from 34.4% in 1897 to 0.6% in 1989.<sup>8,9</sup> But hundreds of Armenian cultural sites and markers remained, acting as a reminder of the large community that had once lived there.

As Moscow once again lost its grip over the South Caucasus, dormant ethnic tensions flared between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Sporadic fighting between civilians from 1988 to 1991, such as the Sumgait and Baku pogroms targeting Armenians, and the Gugark pogrom and Khojaly massacre targeting Azerbaijanis, escalated into the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Tensions worsened when the parliament of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast voted to join the Armenian SSR in 1988, and military action followed when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.<sup>10</sup> In the following months, Nagorno-Karabakh—still internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan—declared independence as the Republic of Artsakh.<sup>11</sup> Azerbaijani and Artsakhi forces clashed for two years, burning

villages and forcing civilians from their homes. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Over a million people were forced to flee—from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia; from Armenia to Azerbaijan; and from Armenian-occupied sectors of Azerbaijan to other Azeri villages.”<sup>12</sup> A 1994 ceasefire effectively left the still unrecognized Republic of Artsakh in control of most of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven neighboring Azerbaijani districts.<sup>13</sup>

War returned to Nagorno-Karabakh for a brief but violent six weeks in 2020 as Azerbaijani forces quickly overran much of Artsakh’s southern flank, forcing the small republic to cede control of all territory outside of Nagorno-Karabakh, along with a portion of that region. Russian peacekeepers supervised the ensuing ceasefire to ensure that the Lachin humanitarian corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia remains open for civilian use. There have been skirmishes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces as well as a blockade of the Lachin corridor in the ensuing years, but territorial holdings remain largely unchanged.<sup>14 15</sup> However, with a delineated zone of control which now places ethnically Armenian communities in Azerbaijani hands, concerns over the treatment of cultural heritage sites have grown.

## **Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Nakhchivan**

Nakhchivan, despite not being a major area of contention in the modern Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, has been central to Azerbaijan’s destruction of Armenian cultural heritage. Although the region’s population is almost fully Azerbaijani in 2023, Armenians have contributed significantly to Nakhchivan’s medieval and pre-modern history, which undermines the nationalist idea of Nakhchivan as being inherently Azerbaijani. But beginning in at least 1997, monasteries, churches, and graveyards have been gradually and quietly demolished, often to be replaced with symbols of Azerbaijani nationality. Through CHW’s work using satellite imagery to catalog historically significant Armenian cultural sites, researchers discovered that 108 such sites—around 98% of those existing prior to independence from the Soviet Union—have been demolished.<sup>16</sup>

Particularly significant sites, such as the Cemetery of Old Jugha (Julfa), have been part of Azerbaijan’s intentional demolitions. This primarily Armenian Apostolic cemetery was the first site where destruction was directly observed, as “eye-witnesses from the Iranian border zone” watched while cranes excavated tombstones and bulldozers flattened the ground. Attempting to hide the cemetery’s destruction, Azerbaijani authorities restricted movement near the site. A report by the International Council on Monuments and Sites in 2007 found that, following the site’s destruction, the Azerbaijani military “stationed a firing range on the Julfa Cemetery and turned the site into a ‘military zone’ so that it could ban foreign missions and observers from entering it,” preventing both a delegation

from the European Parliament and the U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Matthew Bryza, from examining the site.<sup>17</sup> Other destroyed Armenian sites include the abandoned villages surrounding the Church of Mijin Ankuzik/Anzur and St. Gevorg Church of Nor Poradasht, where bulldozers removed evidence of prior Armenian habitation.<sup>18</sup> Parallels throughout the region were found by CHW, suggesting that these demolitions were part of an orchestrated campaign to erase Nakhchivan’s Armenian history.

Many destroyed Armenian sites have been replaced by symbols of Azerbaijani nationality. CHW was able to find five such cases of replacement. Two notable examples are the St. Tovma Monastery of Agulis and the New Armenian Cemetery of Nakhchivan. According to CHW, “St. Tovma (St. Thomas) Monastery was one of the most important religious centers in medieval Armenia.” The monastery remained in good condition when documented by historian Argam Ayvazyan in the late Soviet era. But satellite imagery shows that, starting around the year 2000, the complex had been slowly dismantled; it was completely razed in 2009. In 2014, a Shia mosque was built in its place, transforming the site into a symbol of Azerbaijani religious identity.<sup>19</sup> Ayvazyan also documented the New Armenian Cemetery of Nakhchivan, where he recorded approximately one thousand tombstones, many of which had Armenian inscriptions. According to satellite imagery, this was also slowly demolished during the 2000s. By 2013, construction was underway for the State Flag Square and Museum of Nakhchivan: a large complex with a 57-meter flagpole dedicated to Azerbaijani history and culture.<sup>20 21 22</sup> Both sites are clear examples of the state’s attempts to promote a skewed, wholly-Azerbaijani historical narrative.

## **Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh**

Following the capture of majority-Armenian villages in 2020, the cultural erasure seen in Nakhchivan began to be repeated in Nagorno-Karabakh as authorities destroyed Armenian churches, cemeteries, museums, and other culturally significant sites. According to CHW, seven sites have been fully destroyed, eight were damaged, and fifteen have been categorized as “threatened.”<sup>23</sup> The government is employing many of the same tools used in Nakhchivan to rewrite regional history, making captured areas appear to be homogeneously Azerbaijani.

For example, the Azerbaijani government destroyed churches and reclassified them as “Caucasian Albanian”—a regional ethnic group from the Middle Ages that Azeri nationalists claim are forebears of Azerbaijanis.<sup>24</sup> However, unlike in Nakhchivan, these sites are now being demolished within active Armenian communities, resulting in the destruction of civilian infrastructure. For instance, the St. Sargis Church in the village of Mokhrenes/Susanlyg, which had been in service until 2020, was destroyed around early to mid-2022. Satellite images showed the church and the village around it completely intact in

October 2021 and March 2022—while images from July 2022 showed that the church and much of the surrounding village had been razed. Beyond just destroying this site of Armenian religious identity, the Azerbaijani government reclassified the church as an Albanian temple, denying any relationship between the village's history and its Armenian population.<sup>25</sup> The local cemetery narrowly avoided the destruction the rest of the village faced, but CHW judged that because of "the apparent targeting of Mokhrenes for demolition, the historic cemetery is designated as threatened."<sup>26</sup>

Because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict's notoriety, supranational organizations have taken notice of the erasure of Armenian cultural heritage in the region. In March 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning Azerbaijan's policy of cultural erasure and called on the government to allow international observers from organizations such as UNESCO to access known Armenian cultural sites to ensure their preservation.<sup>27</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a similar resolution.<sup>28</sup> However, these organizations can do little of practical value: The EU has no authority in Azerbaijan, and there is no binding framework permitting action by the Council of Europe.<sup>29</sup> Ineffective outside intervention led experts on Caucasian cultures and archaeology to seek assistance from the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

## Stopping the Erasure

In 2021, Armenia filed a case with the ICJ, accusing the Azerbaijani government of violating the Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) because of its mistreatment of Armenian cultural sites. CHW presented satellite imagery as evidence, demonstrating that Azerbaijani authorities have conducted a secretive campaign of cultural erasure in Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>30</sup> Deliberations lasted until December 2021, with the ICJ deciding that Azerbaijan's actions did violate CERD. As a result, Azerbaijan was ordered to prohibit such acts of vandalism and punish those who contributed to the destruction of cultural sites.<sup>31</sup> Lori Khatchadourian, an associate professor at the Cornell University Department of Near Eastern Studies who helped create CHW, said that the decision "sets a new precedent for cultural heritage protection globally." She further stated that categorization of abuses of heritage as racial discrimination gives hope that "this ruling will deter the egregious acts of damage and destruction that we have documented over the past year."<sup>32</sup>

Regrettably, destruction of cultural heritage sites continued following the ICJ decision, as the events that transpired in Mokhrenes/Susanlyg occurred several months after the case had been decided. Thus, the ability of the international community to prevent further cultural erasure remains in doubt. Several countries, such as Russia and Türkiye, have significant military, political, and economic ties to the region, yet have done little to directly

resolve the crisis. Russia, which is nominally an Armenian ally, has only asked for assurances of "preservation and normal operation" of heritage sites, not instituting diplomatic or economic punishments on Azerbaijan.<sup>33</sup> Russian pressure seems even less likely because of the war in Ukraine, which has led to Russian troop withdrawals from the Southern Caucasus and a refusal to intervene during the September 2022 Armenia-Azerbaijan clashes, all of which has caused Armenian-Russian relations to reach their lowest point since independence.<sup>34</sup> Türkiye's position as Azerbaijan's closest partner puts it in a position to pressure the government to end the erasure, but it has so far remained silent on the issue and generally supportive of Azerbaijan's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>35</sup> It therefore may take significant pressure from more distant third-parties to effect measurable changes in Azerbaijani policy towards Armenian cultural heritage.

## Cultural Genocide?

There is now an open question over how to label Azerbaijan's actions in Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh: Has this become, or is it becoming, a cultural genocide? According to Associate Professor Payam Akhavan of McGill University, while "Physical genocide is the mass killing of the members of a targeted group... Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group."<sup>36</sup> Simon Maghakyan, an international relations researcher who co-authored a report on monument loss in 2019, has labeled this erasure of heritage sites as cultural genocide.<sup>37</sup> It is unclear whether Azerbaijan's actions in Nakhchivan would fit the definition, as cultural genocide is typically conducted against a community that still lives in the territory where cultural heritage is being destroyed. But by this definition, the destruction unleashed on Mokhrenes/Susanlyg in Nagorno-Karabakh could well be the start of an operation that can be labeled "cultural genocide," as cultural heritage sites were destroyed in the presence of large Armenian population. This question will be answered within the coming months and years as the Azerbaijani government's plans in Nagorno-Karabakh are revealed.

## Conclusion

Armenia and Azerbaijan have a century-long history of conflict and cultural erasure perpetrated by zealous nationalists and governments. While these episodes of bigotry have often manifested in direct violence, the recent destruction of heritage sites in Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh has demonstrated that it can manifest in non-direct forms as well. The international community has intervened to declare Azerbaijani treatment of Armenian sites illegal under international law, creating a standard by which the destruction of heritage can be prosecuted. But little concrete action has been taken by the international community against the Azerbaijani government: the abuses continue, leading to the continuation of a cycle of symbolic nationalist violence.