



CENTER FOR
TRUTH &
JUSTICE



The Deliberate and Systematic Erasure of Armenian Cultural and Religious Sites by Azerbaijan in 2024

Contact: Sharmagh Mardi, Lilit Harutyunyan

info@cftjustice.org

www.CFTJustice.org



@CFTJustice



@CFTJustice



@CFTJustice

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Report Overview

Due to the long history of Armenian presence in the region, Nagorno-Karabakh has a significant concentration of Armenian monuments. There are around 500 historic sites, home to 6,000¹² Armenian monuments. After a 10 month blockade followed by the September 2023 military assault causing the forcible displacement of 120,000 ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijan continued the practice of destroying Armenian churches or converting them to mosques. The future of these and other Armenian religious sites face an imminent danger of destruction or erasure.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the systematic and widespread destruction and appropriation of cultural and religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh by the Republic of Azerbaijan, a pattern that continued in 2024. This ongoing erasure is carried out through various means, including but not limited to the deliberate desecration of cultural heritage, systematic historical revisionism, and denial of access to Armenian cultural heritage sites, all of which are clear breaches of international laws and conventions protecting cultural rights.

Azerbaijan's acts of vandalism, destruction, and conversion are part of a broader, long-standing campaign to erase the historical and cultural ties of the ethnic Armenians to their indigenous lands in the South Caucasus. Beyond the destruction of historical landmarks, Azerbaijan's actions constitute an attack on faith itself. Armenian churches and monasteries have long been places of worship, community and spiritual refuge. The deliberate desecration, destruction, and forced repurposing of these sacred sites are not only violations of cultural rights but also an assault on religious freedom, depriving displaced Armenians of their ability to practice their faith in their ancestral homeland. Through analysis of documented incidents and legal framework, this report aims to highlight the ongoing cultural erasure in the wake of the conflict and the urgent need for global efforts to protect cultural and religious heritage.

1.2 Methodology

The Center for Truth and Justice (CFTJ) is a human rights organization that collects testimonial evidence to document human rights violations and war crimes against Armenians. The evidence-gathering methodology CFTJ uses can be found here: [Methodology](#).³ CFTJ preserves evidence and makes it available for educational purposes, advocacy, and potential legal actions. The work of CFTJ is dedicated to amplifying the voices of victims of human rights violations, including discrimination, ethnic cleansing, displacement, war crimes, mass atrocities, and genocide. CFTJ educates and trains teams on evidence-based interview techniques, complying with international legal standards and rules of evidence. The mission of CFTJ is to serve as a

¹ "Monument Watch." Monument Watch, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/>. [Accessed, January 2025].

² Bedrosyan, R. (2024, January 10). *Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenian heritage aim to erase an entire culture*. The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/azerbaijans-attacks-on-armenian-heritage-aim-to-erase-an-entire-culture-222655>

³ <https://www.cftjustice.org/investigations-methodology/>

living memorial to those who perished or suffered from human rights abuses and war crimes. A permanent home for victim testimonies, CFTJ strives to foster education, empathy, justice, and change.

1.3 Overview of Cultural and Religious Heritage Sites in Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh is renowned for its rich cultural and religious heritage that spans millennia. It is home to numerous ancient monasteries, churches, and monuments that reflect the deep historical and spiritual connection of the Armenian people to this land. The cultural and religious sites played a significant role in the lives of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. They served as central places of worship, community gathering, and cultural preservation. CFTJ witness 23LC-0039 states:

“The church is the abode of God. I go to church to participate in mass and receive the sacrament. I pray at home, but prefer to go sit alone at the church, speak and pray to God. My dream is to go back to Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] and visit the church to receive the sacrament.”⁴

Among the most notable sites is the Gandzasar Monastery, a masterpiece of Armenian medieval architecture built in the 13th century. Another significant site is the Dadivank Monastery, situated on the slopes of the Mrav Mountains dating back to the 9th-13th centuries, being one of the largest and most historically important Armenian monasteries. The Cathedral of Christ the Holy Savior, commonly known as Ghazanchetsots Cathedral, is another prominent landmark, located in the city of Shushi and constructed in the 19th century, it symbolizes the Armenian architectural revival of that era and serves as a major spiritual site. CFTJ witness 21LC-NK0072 states:

“It was a regular practice for Armenians to gather and light candles in the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral.”⁵

The region is also home to the Amaras Monastery, founded in the 4th century. This ancient monastery is particularly significant as it is where Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, established the first school in the region. Additionally, the archaeological site of Tigranakert of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ancient Armenian city founded in the 1st century BCE, highlights the region’s historical importance.

These sites are not merely places of worship but also enduring symbols of Armenian history, art, and cultural identity. They underscore the role of Nagorno-Karabakh as a cradle of Armenian Christian heritage. However, in recent years, these cultural treasures have faced significant threats due to ongoing conflict and territorial disputes. Concerns about their preservation and accessibility have been raised by cultural and human rights organizations, highlighting the urgent need for international efforts to safeguard this invaluable heritage.

1.4 Background

⁴ CFTJ witness 23LC-0039, Testimony taken on 12 October, 2023

⁵ CFTJ witness 21LC-NK0072, Testimony taken on 12 May, 2022

In September 2020, the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh had three branches of government with an established Parliament and functioned as a democracy with a free economy. On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh resulting in the tragic loss of 5,000 Armenian lives and ended with a ceasefire in November 2020.

On December 12, 2022, the Azerbaijani government created a humanitarian crisis for the ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh as it trapped and starved the region under the blockade of the Lachin Corridor. Nine months later on September 19, 2023 — violating the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War ceasefire agreement — Azerbaijan launched another large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh in primarily civilian regions. Within a day of bombardment, a ceasefire was reached that forced the unconditional surrender of the de-facto republic and armed forces, as well as the seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan. Considering the grave human rights violations committed before the 2020 war, during the 2020 and 2023 wars, as well as blatant rhetoric from government officials disparaging ethnic Armenians, an exodus of Armenians began in the following days, seeing nearly all 120,000 Armenians forcefully displaced from their indigenous lands. Armenians were forced to abandon their gravesites, cultural heritage, and homes to avoid injury and death.

As of September 2023, the population of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh drastically diminished as the population fled to the Republic of Armenia for safety. With this mass exodus, Nagorno-Karabakh has ceased to exist as an independent and democratic republic and, for the first time in its history, stands entirely devoid of Armenians. This tragic displacement has left the region's rich cultural and religious heritage unprotected, including its ancient monasteries, churches, and monuments, which now face the risk of neglect, vandalism, and destruction.

2.0 Legal Framework

The destruction and appropriation of Armenian cultural and religious heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh constitute clear violations of international legal protections. Multiple treaties and conventions recognize cultural heritage as an integral part of human rights, ensuring the right of communities to access and preserve their history, identity, and places of worship. Azerbaijan's deliberate and systematic destruction of churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and other historical sites not only erases centuries of Armenian presence in Nagorno-Karabakh but also constitutes a direct attack on the rights and identity of the displaced population. The following legal instruments establish the framework that Azerbaijan is bound to respect but continues to violate.

Article 4 of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict states that “The High Contracting Parties undertake to respect cultural property situated within their territory as well as within the territory of other High Contracting Parties by refraining from any use of the property and its immediate surroundings or of the appliances in use for its protection for purposes which are likely to expose it to harm or destruction in the event of armed conflict; and by refraining from any act of hostility, directed against such

property.”⁶ Article 9 of the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict states, “. . . a Party in occupation of the whole or part of the territory of another Party shall prohibit and prevent in relation to the occupied territory: c) “Any alteration to, or change of use of, cultural property which is intended to conceal or destroy cultural, historical or scientific evidence.”⁷

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), guarantees individuals the right to freely manifest their religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.⁸

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)⁹ and Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) recognizes the right of everyone to take part in cultural life.¹⁰ General comment No. 21 Right of everyone to take part in cultural life (art. 15, para. 1 (a), of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) stipulates, “The right of everyone to take part in cultural life, like the other rights enshrined in the Covenant, imposes three types or levels of obligations on States parties: (a) the obligation to respect; (b) the obligation to protect; and (c) the obligation to fulfill.”¹¹ Furthermore, it states, “Cultural heritage must be preserved, developed, enriched and transmitted to future generations as a record of human experience and aspirations. . . .”¹²

Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states, “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their religion, or to use their own language.”¹³ Further, Article 1 of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities Adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992 stipulates, “States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.”¹⁴

Article 9 of the Nara Document states, “Conservation of cultural heritage in all its forms and historical periods is rooted in the values attributed to the heritage. Our ability to understand these values depends, in part, on the degree to which information sources about these values may be

⁶ Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (adopted 14 May, 1954), 249 UNTS 215, art 4.

⁷ Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (adopted 26 March, 1999), 2253 UNTS 172, art 9.

⁸ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNGA Res 217 A (III) (adopted 10 December 1948) (UDHR) art 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, art 27.

¹⁰ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December, 1966), 993 UNTS 3, art 15.

¹¹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, Right of everyone to take part in cultural life (art. 15, para. 1(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/21, 48 (21 December, 2009).

¹² *Ibid.*, 50

¹³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR) preamble, art 27.

¹⁴ Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, G.A. Res. 47/135, (Dec. 18, 1992), art 1.

understood as credible or truthful. Knowledge and understanding of these sources of information, in relation to original and subsequent characteristics of the cultural heritage, and their meaning, is a requisite basis for assessing all aspects of authenticity.”¹⁵

3.0 Key Violations of Azerbaijan

The Church of the Holy All Saviour (Ghazanchetsots Church) - Figure 1



Figure 1¹⁶

The 19th century church of the Holy All Saviour, also known as Ghazanchetsots Church, is situated in the central part of the city of Shushi. It was initially a wooden structured church, evidenced as early as 1821, then it was reconstructed in 1868 as a stone structure and was completed in 1887.¹⁷

On October 8, 2020, Azerbaijani armed forces bombed the church twice (see figure 2). Second bombing occurred using precision-guided munitions, gravely injuring three journalists on-site. The report also highlights that multiple international observers confirmed the absence of any

¹⁵ Nara document on Authenticity. Adopted at Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention. Nara, 1994.

¹⁶ *Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/holy-all-savior-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

¹⁷ Ibid.

military targets in the vicinity of the cathedral.¹⁸ These acts violate international conventions protecting cultural heritage during armed conflicts.



Figure 2 - Aerial view of the church after bombardment¹⁹

During the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan converted the church into a military depot. By the time the Armenians liberated Shushi, Azerbaijan had removed the dome of the church, requiring them to remodel the church.²⁰ Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch stated:

“The two strikes on the church, the second one while journalists and other civilians had gathered at the site, appear to be deliberate. These attacks should be impartially investigated and those responsible held to account.”²¹

In the same report, the Human Rights Watch released a report where it considered the bombardment of the Church as a possible war crime:

“Apparently, a civilian object with cultural significance, was an intentional target despite the absence of evidence that it was used for military purposes,”²²

¹⁸ 2020 Human Rights Report: Azerbaijan, U.S. Department of State, 2020, page 27
<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AZERBAIJAN-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid., *Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH,
<https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/holy-all-savior-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

²⁰ Ibid; *Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH,
<https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/holy-all-savior-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

²¹ *Azerbaijan: Attack on Church a Possible War Crime*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, (16 December, 2020),
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/16/azerbaijan-attack-church-possible-war-crime> (Accessed January, 2025).

²² Ibid.

The two strikes caused significant damage to the southern part of the church, leading to collapses. After occupying the city in 2020, the Azerbaijani military left several inscriptions on the walls of the church.²³ (See figure 3)



Figure 3 - Inscriptions on the walls of the Church under Azerbaijani control²⁴

Following the war, Azerbaijan launched a propaganda campaign that distorted the church's history and significantly altered its appearance. In its report "About the Azerbaijani 'Restoration' of Surb Amenaprkich Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi", Monument Watch states:

"The Azeri media presents Ghazanchetsots Surb Amenaprkich church, sometimes as an Orthodox, sometimes as an Udi church, which 'the Armenians Armenianized that by transforming the dome after the occupation of the city.'²⁵

²³ *About the Azerbaijani "restoration" of Surb Amenaprkich Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/about-the-azerbaijani-restoration-of-surb-amenaprkich-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

²⁴ *A Brief Review of Cultural Heritage Violations in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) in September–November of 2020*, ICOM ARMENIA (30 November, 2020) <https://icom-armenia.mini.icom.museum/a-brief-review-of-cultural-heritage-violations-in-nagorno-kharabagh-artsakh-in-september-november-of-2020/> (Accessed January, 2025)

²⁵ *Ibid; About the Azerbaijani "restoration" of Surb Amenaprkich Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/about-the-azerbaijani-restoration-of-surb-amenaprkich-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

The Azerbaijani authorities demolished the cross-shaped window on one of the gabled facades and the sculpture above it. The sculpture on the western facade, which represented the crucifixion of Christ and was accompanied by an inscription, both were removed.²⁶

On October 7, 2024, Azerbaijani media and social networks circulated videos showing the so-called “restored” state of the Holy All Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi. These videos documented significant alterations to the 19th century Armenian church’s architectural features, including the replacement of its dome and other unauthorized modifications, transforming it into a structure resembling a Russian church.²⁷ These alterations among other things serve as a clear message that Armenian Christianity has no place in Azerbaijan’s vision for the region.



Figure 4²⁸ - The “restored” state of the Ghazanchetsots Church under Azerbaijani occupation

Azerbaijan violates international principles through its restoration practices, as they disregard the importance of accurate and reliable knowledge and authenticity in preserving cultural heritage. This undermines the historical and cultural significance of the heritage sites involved.

Ghazanchetsots Cemetery

The demolition of the cemetery started in October 2023, with reports indicating the destruction of many gravestones from the 18th and 19th centuries (see figure 5). Caucasus Heritage Watch

²⁶ *The Church of the Holy All Saviour in Shushi has been defaced and desecrated*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/the-church-of-the-holy-all-saviour-in-shushi-has-been-defaced-and-desecrated/> (Accessed January, 2025).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid; *About the Azerbaijani “restoration” of Surb Amenaprkich Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/about-the-azerbaijani-restoration-of-surb-amenaprkich-ghazanchetsots-church-in-shushi/> (Accessed January, 2025).

reported that the satellite imagery from April 4, 2024, indicates that the destruction of the Ghazanchetsots cemetery is complete. This is the first instance of cemetery destruction since the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²⁹ The court ruled:

“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 artefacts.”³⁰



Figure 5³¹

The St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church (“The Church of St. John the Baptist”), or Kanach Zham (“Green Church”) - Figure 6

The 19th century Church of St. John the Baptist, also known as “Kanach Zham” (Green Church), was located in the city of Shushi. The church was originally constructed by commoners who had moved to Shushi from the villages of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is why it was called the Gharabaghtsots Church (Church of Karabakh residents).³²

²⁹ *DESTRUCTION ALERT: Ghazanchetsots cemetery, Shusha/Shushi, CAUCASUS HERITAGE*, <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/?p=1593> (Accessed January, 2025).

³⁰ *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*

³¹ *Ibid; DESTRUCTION ALERT: Ghazanchetsots cemetery, Shusha/Shushi, CAUCASUS HERITAGE*, <https://caucasusheritage.cornell.edu/?p=1593> (Accessed January, 2025).

³² *Hovhannes Mkrtych Church of Shushi or Kanach Zham (Green Church)*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/hovhannes-mkrtych-church-of-shushi-or-kanach-zham-green-church/> (Accessed January, 2025).



Figure 6³³

Following the 44-Day war, the church was blown up, causing damage to the church's dome and bell tower.³⁴ In July 2021, Azerbaijani authorities, without any legitimate justification, denied the church's Armenian affiliation and initiated actions to reclassify it as a Russian Orthodox structure, attempting to 'convert' the church and conduct unauthorized religious rituals, thereby undermining its original religious function for the Armenian community. Furthermore, the pastor's house, which was a vital component of the church's religious activities for the Armenian Christian community, serving as a meeting place and library for the clergy, was transformed by Azerbaijani authorities into a café.³⁵

On April 4, 2024, satellite imagery (see Figure 7) confirmed that the church of St. John the Baptist had been completely destroyed, marking the culmination of years of deliberate vandalism by Azerbaijan.³⁶ The destruction of the Kanach Zham is yet another proof that Armenians, even if they return, have no place to pray, gather, or pass down their faith to future generations.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Photographs may be found here: Styopa Safaryan (@StyopaS) X (formerly Twitter) (29 July, 2023) <https://x.com/StyopaS/status/1685340126413471744> (Accessed January, 2025).

³⁵ Azerbaijan Demolished the Surb Hovhannes Mkrtych (Kanach Zham) Church of Shushi, Reducing It to Rubble, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-demolished-the-surb-hovhannes-mkrtych-kanach-zham-church-of-shushi-reducing-it-to-rubble> (Accessed January, 2025).

³⁶ Caucasus Heritage, FACEBOOK, (18 April, 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15w75eyqyp/> (Accessed January, 2025).



Figure 7

The Church of Tandzatap - Figure 8

The 19th century Church of Tandzatap is located in the village of Tandzatap in the Kashatagh region of Nagorno-Karabakh. A contemporary cemetery used to extend around the structure, which was destroyed by Azerbaijan between 1989 and 1993. During this period, Azerbaijan also intentionally damaged the church itself. In particular, tombstones with Armenian inscriptions and the surrounding khachkars (crosstones) were demolished.³⁷



Figure 8 - The view of the church from the north-east, photo by S. Karapetyan.³⁸

³⁷ *Azerbaijan destroyed the Church of Tandzatap*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-destroyed-the-church-of-tandzatap/> (Accessed January, 2025).

³⁸ *The Church of Tandzatap*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-church-of-tandzatap/> (Accessed January, 2025).

Satellite imagery analyzed by Caucasus Heritage Watch confirms the complete destruction of the church between October 2023 and April 2024 by Azerbaijani forces (see figure 9).³⁹

This recent demolition is part of a broader historical pattern of eradicating the evidence of Armenian identity in the region. During the Soviet era, Azerbaijan launched a systematic campaign aimed at destroying Armenian religious sites and cemeteries. Furthermore, Azerbaijani authorities were systematically depopulating Armenian villages and dismantling their cultural heritage.⁴⁰

The destruction of the Tandzatap Church is the continuation of a deliberate campaign to erase the tangible evidence of Armenian identity in the region, undermining its cultural and historical legacy.



Figure 9

The Church of Vankasar - Figure 10

The 7th century Church of Vankasar is an Armenian church located in the Askeran region of Nagorno-Karabakh, within the territory of the ancient Armenian city of Tigranakert. It belongs to the type of the early medieval small cruciform central-domed triapsidal Armenian churches, with a design closely resembling that of smaller churches in Talin, Karashamb, and Aylaber.⁴¹

³⁹ *Caucasus Heritage*, FACEBOOK, (18 November, 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/CaucasusHW/posts/pfbid0Wf5uRPG7B67vMphtixHLCjiJhzifFdSpnfTTjo2FPaRoaU3FJ4ntMT7cTmJf92H6l?rdid=q7zv1CwaoLZOxNfl#> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*; *Azerbaijan destroyed the church of Tandzatap*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-destroyed-the-church-of-tandzatap/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁴¹ *The Church of Vankasar*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-church-of-vankasar/> (Accessed January, 2025).



Figure 10⁴²

In the 1980s, Azerbaijani authorities carried out poorly executed “restoration” work that severely altered the church’s original features:

“The cornices were not lined up on the fronts, the Armenian inscription and the cross relief on the lintel of the western entrance were deliberately destroyed. The window openings have also been modified. The methods of realizing construction of structural nodes (squinces, tholobates, vault, dome) have been changed.”⁴³

⁴² *Activity At Recaptured Church In Azerbaijan Raises Concern*, RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY (20 April, 2021), <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-church-vankasar-satellite-imagery/31213704.html> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁴³ *Ibid*; *The Church of Vankasar*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-church-of-vankasar/> (Accessed January, 2025).

Around the church, the natural environment and landscape were also disrupted by the construction of leisure and entertainment facilities, which were later damaged during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.⁴⁴

At the end of January 2024, a video⁴⁵ was circulated on the Azerbaijani @togrulavshar Instagram account, showing that the cross atop the church's dome had been removed, signaling further desecration of the site. (see Figure 11)



Figure 11

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Toghrul Hasanov (@togrulavshar), INSTAGRAM, (1 February, 2024), <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C20Lm14rot5/?igsh=MTg4aGJldTJsMm8ycw%3D%3D&fbclid=IwAR3kvKbL-hXDc07D8M-jiMH6pCApeMOVUknJL34G8RI8Y3B9mcgiW6GivJw> (Accessed January, 2025).

St. Hambardzum Church of Berdzor - Figure 12

St. Hambardzum Church of Nagorno-Karabakh was located on the rocky slope of the Hakari River's left bank. The construction of the church was completed in 1998, with its dome cross consecrated on May 31 of the same year. Since its foundation, the church has served as a spiritual hub for the region, with Priest Athanas as its first pastor, followed by Ter Benjamin Tsaturyan starting in 2019.⁴⁶



Figure 12⁴⁷

Decorative elements included khachkars, a sundial, and inscriptions commemorating the builders and the church's consecration. One inscription highlighted the church's significance:

“The newly settled Kashatagh people built the St. Hambardzum Church, hoping in God (in memory of thousands of our martyred brothers). ... All praise to our gracious Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Surb Hambardzum Church of Berdzor*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/surb-hambardzum-church-of-berdzor/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Church, The Surb Astvatsatsin Church of Old Skhtorashen*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument-category/church/page/3/> (Accessed January, 2025).

The churchyard housed additional khachkars, including those dedicated to the Armenian Genocide’s 90th anniversary and the victims of the Spitak earthquake. The Armenian community of Lebanon donated the church’s two bells.⁴⁹

Video footage posted by American journalist Lindsey Snell shows the Azerbaijani soldiers in Berdzor, mocking Armenians and comparing the church of St. Hambardzum that they have now demolished to a toilet a few months after the war of 2020.⁵⁰

In 2021, Azerbaijan’s “Public Organization for the Protection of Monuments”⁵¹ suggested a plan to transform the church into a mosque. The details of the project were published on March 5, on the YouTube page of the organization based on which, the church’s dome spire and bell tower would be dismantled, two minarets would be built, and the high reliefs, crosses, and khachkars on the church would be removed.⁵²

On May 11, 2024, satellite imagery confirmed that St. Hambardzum Church had been completely destroyed by Azerbaijani authorities (see Figure 13).⁵³ The destruction was deliberate, as evidenced by Azerbaijani Telegram channels that falsely labeled the church as an “illegal structure” built by Armenians during the 1990s and justified its demolition.⁵⁴



Figure 13

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lindsey Snell (@LindseySnell), X (formerly Twitter) (21 May, 2021) <https://x.com/LindseySnell/status/1395491977052016643> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵¹ *Monuments.az*, <http://monuments.az/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵² LAÇIN Kilsə Məscidə çevriləcək (@monumentsaz), YOUTUBE (5 March, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykBEqtx_h2Q

⁵³ Աղբբեջանը հիմնահատուակ ոչնչացրել է Բերձորի Սուրբ Համբարձում եկեղեցին (11 May, 2024) ARMENPRESS.AM, <https://armenpress.am/hy/article/1136862> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵⁴ Azerbaijan obliterated the Surb Hambardzum Church of Berdzor, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/azerbaijan-obliterated-the-surb-hambardzum-church-of-berdzor/> (Accessed January, 2025).

Azerbaijani Telegram channel @MaidenTower reported:

“... In 1998, Armenian barbarians built an unauthorized construction in the form of a “church” in Lachin. After the liberation of Lachin from Armenian occupation, Armenians tried to stir up inter-religious hatred by inventing stories about how the Azerbaijani authorities were going to convert the “church” into a mosque. The result is logical: the illegal construction was liquidated.”⁵⁵

St. Sargis Church of Tsar - Figure 14

The church of St. Sargis is situated in the village of Tsar in Nor Shahumyan (Karvachar region) of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to the inscription of the entrance lintel, it was built in 1279. St. Sargis is a single-nave, vaulted chapel made of hewn stones and upper parts constructed with smaller stones from later renovations. The church featured a total of eight inscriptions on its walls.⁵⁶

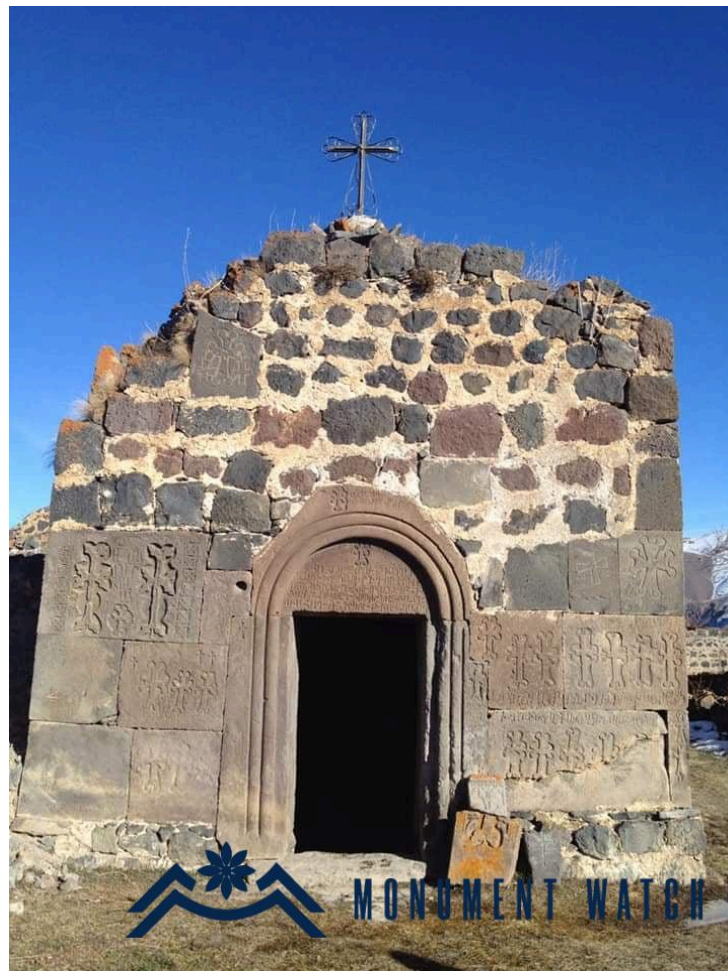


Figure 14 - St. Sargis Church⁵⁷

⁵⁵ @MaidenTower, (11 May, 2024) TELEGRAM, <https://t.me/MaidenTower/48195?single> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵⁶ *St. Grigor and St. Sargis churches of Tsar*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/st-grigor-and-st-sargis-churches-of-tsar-st-grigor-and-st-sargis-churches-of-tsar/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

On February 21, 2024, photos posted by the “Scientific-Research Center for Historical-Cultural Heritage” revealed Azerbaijani activity around the church in the occupied Tsar. The cross of St. Sargis and one of the inscribed stones were removed, and fragments of khachkars are also missing from the church premises (see Figure 15).⁵⁸ The inscription contained unique historical details, including the term “hamadki”, an Armenian land measurement unit found only in the inscriptions unique to Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁹ The destruction of this artifact represents an irreplaceable loss of Armenian epigraphy.



Figure 15

⁵⁸ «Պատմամշակութային ժառանգության Գիտահետազոտական Կենտրոն» ՊՈԱԿ, FACEBOOK, (21 February, 2024) <https://www.facebook.com/armheritage/posts/pfbid02XMEMJaRR2AWSom22zoq2h8jp5PgJRFXbcip6wV5UvV2oNR27aPdQUoeBAIjStkxI> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁵⁹ *It Was the Tsar Settlement's Turn*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/it-was-the-tsar-settlements-turn/> (Accessed January, 2025).

Mokhrenes Village

Mokhrenes village, located in the Hadrut region of Nagorno-Karabakh, came under Azerbaijani control in October 2020. The village and its surroundings are notable for their rich historical and cultural heritage, with over 20 documented monuments, including the renowned “Okhty Drni” monastery situated nearby.⁶⁰

Satellite imagery from 2024 confirms the complete destruction of Mokhrenes village by Azerbaijani forces. Most of the village’s houses, its school, kindergarten, and other structures have been demolished. This follows earlier acts of cultural erasure, such as the destruction of the village’s St. Sargis Church in 2022 (see Figure 16).⁶¹



Figure 16

Since 2021, large-scale road construction projects, including two new roads to Shushi, have led to significant destruction of Armenian villages and historical sites. The construction activities have included the deployment of heavy machinery, the establishment of maintenance camps, and the storage of materials and waste, often at the expense of Armenian heritage.⁶²

⁶⁰ *The Mokhrenes village has been the target of Azerbaijani attacks*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/the-mokhrenes-village-has-been-the-target-of-azerbaijani-attacks/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Մոխրենես գյուղը՝ ադրբեջանական հարձակումների թիրախում*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/hy/alerts/%D5%B4%D5%B8%D5%AD%D6%80%D5%A5%D5%B6%D5%A5%D5%BD-%D5%A3%D5%B5%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B2%D5%A8%D5%9D-%D5%A1%D5%A4%D6%80%D5%A2%D5%A5%D5%BB%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%A1%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%B6-%D5%B0%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%B1%D5%A1/> (Accessed January, 2025).

On July 26, 2024, the Deputy Editor in Chief of Armenpress posted on X (formerly Twitter) social media the video depicting the continuing demolition of the village based on satellite imagery from 2022 to 2024.⁶³

The destruction of Mokhrenes serves as a reminder of the urgency of the need for international intervention to protect what remains of the region's Armenian cultural heritage.

Karin Tak Village

On April 5, 2024, Google Earth updated its satellite images of the Askeran and Shushi regions, revealing the complete destruction of Karin Tak village in the Shushi region (see Figure 17). Throughout its history, the village has been home exclusively to an Armenian population, maintaining a distinct Armenian ethnic and religious identity.⁶⁴

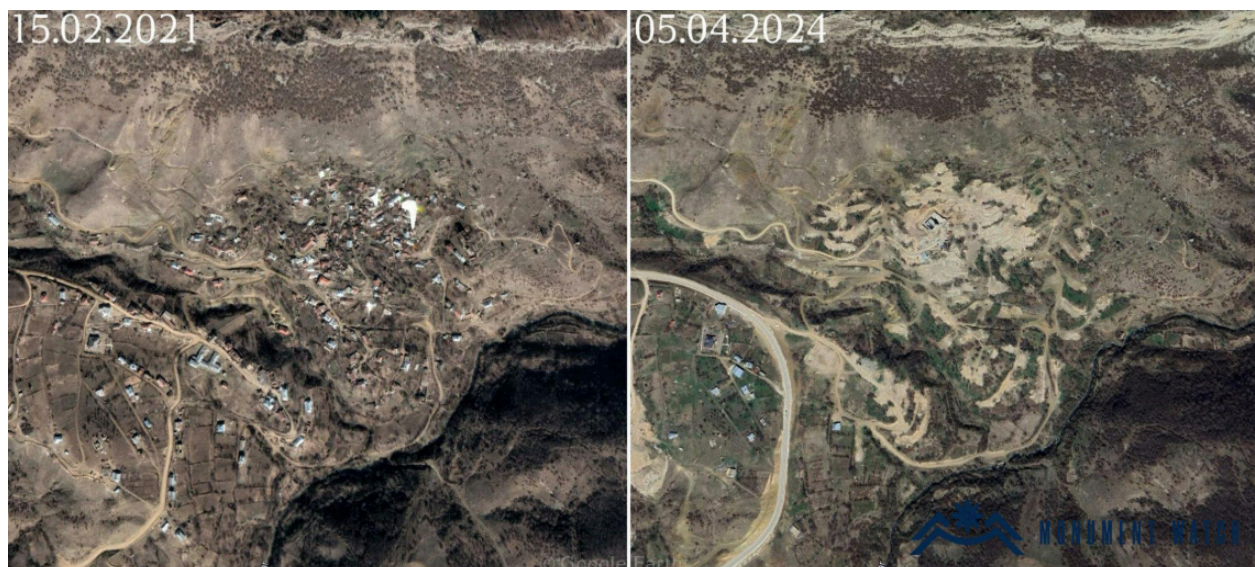


Figure 17

The Artsakh cultural heritage monitoring website documented that Azerbaijan had leveled the village, demolishing its historic quarters, springs, civil infrastructure, and natural environment. Among the destroyed sites were essential community centers, including the secondary school, kindergarten, cultural center, health center, and village hall. As a result of vandalism, the World War II monument located in the center of the village was also destroyed.⁶⁵

In April 2024, Climate Home News reported that the village of Karin Tak, once home to a few hundred ethnic Armenians, had been nearly entirely razed to the ground.

⁶³ Ararat Petrosyan (@araratpetrosian), X (formerly Twitter) (26 July, 2024) <https://x.com/araratpetrosian/status/1816860584463229390> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶⁴ Complete destruction of the village of Karintak by Azerbaijan, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/complete-destruction-of-the-village-of-karintak-by-azerbaijan/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

“Climate Home travelled past what little remains of Karintak village ... Now nearly the entire settlement appears to have been razed to the ground, as Climate Home witnessed.”⁶⁶

The destruction of Karin Tak is part of Azerbaijan’s systematic erasure of Armenian cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the 2020 war, the memorial dedicated to the 1991–1994 self-defense of Karin Tak was destroyed. In 2021, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev initiated plans to alter the village’s cultural and religious environment, which included laying the foundation for a mosque.⁶⁷ The Climate Home News witnessed the mosque construction in 2024 when traveling past the village, stating that “mounds of disturbed soil surround a large mosque, under construction.”⁶⁸

The destruction of Karin Tak was not limited to homes and infrastructure, it extended to the heart of the community’s spiritual life. The Holy Mother of God Church, a sacred place where generations of Armenians gathered for prayer and sacraments, was desecrated beyond recognition. A video uploaded on 23 March, 2021, to the @karabakhonor495 YouTube channel⁶⁹ shows Azerbaijani soldiers violating the sanctity of the church, climbing on the apse, and walking through its ruined interior with blatant disrespect. The Holy Altar, the most sacred part of the church, was violently broken and split in two.

Additionally, the Azerbaijani forces were disrespecting the religious purpose of the Christian church by conducting Muslim prayers within its sacred space.⁷⁰

This village, once a vibrant symbol of Armenian cultural identity, has now been reduced to rubble, marking a significant loss for Nagorno-Karabakh’s heritage and history.

Gandzasar Monastery - Figure 18

The Gandzasar Monastery is located about 1.5 kilometers to the west of Vank village, in the Martakert region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The first documented reference to Gandzasar dates back to 949.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *In Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's net-zero vision clashes with legacy of war*, CLIMATE HOME NEWS, (15 May, 2024) <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/05/15/in-nagorno-karabakh-azerbajians-net-zero-vision-clashes-with-legacy-of-war/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶⁷ *Ibid; Complete destruction of the village of Karintak by Azerbaijan*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/complete-destruction-of-the-village-of-karintak-by-azerbaijan/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶⁸ *Ibid; In Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan's net-zero vision clashes with legacy of war*, CLIMATE HOME NEWS, (15 May, 2024) <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2024/05/15/in-nagorno-karabakh-azerbajians-net-zero-vision-clashes-with-legacy-of-war/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁶⁹ *Տուսադա կիւսեճճ ճհլի սւննճ զարճսիմլա վճհճտ ճզանի վերճրկճն*, Karabakh Honor (@karabakhonor495), YOUTUBE (23 March, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IRHHnTHIRwg> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁷⁰ *St. Astvatsatsin Church of Karintak*, MONUMENT WATCH <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/st-astvatsatsin-church-of-karintak/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁷¹ *The Monastery of Gandzasar: general information*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-monastery-of-gandzasar-general-information/> (Accessed January, 2025).



Figure 18 - The general view of the monastery, photo by Hrayr Baze.⁷²

In the fall of 2024, Rizvan Huseynov, a prominent Azerbaijani propagandist, visited Gandzasar and Dadivank monasteries and filmed a series of videos that suggest that Armenians have distorted the historical appearance of these monasteries, Armenianized them, and altered them.

In the video posted by Rizvan Huseinov⁷³, he alleges that the inscriptions on the walls of Gandzasar have been added by Armenians and this falsification took place in the last century. The exterior facades of Gandzasar and its apse bear numerous inscriptions, which contain information about the political, spiritual, and economic conditions of medieval Nagorno-Karabakh. Falsely discrediting these inscriptions constitutes a direct assault on the history of the region. Regarding the church's exterior walls, Huseinov noted that some facing stones used in the masonry are recent and were brought from Armenia, specifically from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, indicating attempts to Armenianize the church. Huseinov claims that the only surviving inscription relates to the church's construction, which he says he has deciphered. According to him, the monastery was built by Hasan-Jalal, whom he identifies as the Turkic governor of Khachen. He also states that the inscription mentions Hasan-Jalal's wives, the people of Caucasian Albania, the Albanian church leader, and an individual named Kochu Bey. Huseynov's allegations contradict the wealth of historical research and evidence available,

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Албанский Гандзасарский монастырь. Агдере - 01.10.2024*, Ризван Гусейнов (@rizer001), YOUTUBE (5 October, 2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UepIvPZPP10> (Accessed January, 2025).

which include photographs of the church, including those taken in the 19th century, showing its undamaged walls and inscriptions.⁷⁴

Dadivank Monastery

The Dadivank Monastery, built in 1214 is located in the Khachen province of Artsakh and its construction dates to the 13th century. The first mention of the monastery was in the 9th century in bibliographic sources, known as Dado monastery, linked to the martyrdom of Dadi, a disciple of the apostle Thaddeus.⁷⁵ There are more than 200 Armenian inscriptions in the monastery.⁷⁶ Azerbaijan took control of the monastery after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020.



Figure 19 - The inner yard of the church structures, photo by H. Petrosyan.⁷⁷

The CFTJ witness 22LC-NK0010, who is the former abbot of Dadivank Monastery, tells the history of Dadivank in his testimony:

⁷⁴ *Further Falsifications Regarding Dadivank and Gandzasar*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/further-falsifications-regarding-dadivank-and-gandzasar/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁷⁵ *The monastic complex of Dadivank. General information*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-monastic-complex-of-dadivank-general-information/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁷⁶ *Details. Dadivank monastery: the khachkar of 1182 AD*, MONUMENT WATCH, https://monumentwatch.org/en/facts_and_details/details-dadivank-monastery-the-khachkar-of-1182-ad/ (Accessed January, 2025).

⁷⁷ *Ibid., The monastic complex of Dadivank. General information*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/monument/the-monastic-complex-of-dadivank-general-information/> (Accessed January, 2025).

“Dadivank’s history dates back to the first century. The name Dadivank is after Saint Dadi, a disciple of Saint Thaddeus, who came to spread Christianity in Armenia and Artsakh. Saint Dadi was stoned to death and buried where the Dadivank Monastery is. Until the fourth century there was only his grave, but Christians knowing where he was buried, would go and pray there. When in the fourth century, in 301, Armenia officially accepted Christianity as a national religion, Dadivank became a pilgrimage site. It remained so until 1212 when the construction of the monastery began.”⁷⁸

Dadivank has been the subject of Huseinov’s further claims. He rejects the authenticity of the extensive construction inscription carved on the church’s southern facade, the prominent sculptures, and the multicolored composition, asserting that they were created in the last decade using stones transported from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. In the cases of Gandzasar, Dadivank, and Amaras, Huseinov explicitly attributes responsibility to the official Etchmiadzin and accordingly, the Armenian Apostolic Church. Huseinov claims that Hasan-Jalal built Dadivank and says the frescoes in the church are early medieval art, even though he dates the church to the 13th century. He also describes Dadivank as a Dyophysitic Albanian church.⁷⁹

During the Soviet era, the monastery was neglected and partly ruined because of Soviet Azerbaijan’s policies, as documented in photographs during that period.⁸⁰ The witness 22LC-NK0010 further states:

“When Dadivank was liberated in 1993, alongside with others I visited the place and, it is difficult for me to say, but the monastery was transformed to a barn. There were cattle inside: sheep, donkeys, cows... I saw it myself. There was manure one meter high, inside the monastery. We initiated the cleaning process.”⁸¹

Despite the historical evidence, Azerbaijan continues its appropriation policy of claiming the monastery as Christian-Albanian. A video posted by the “Kəlbəcər” account on X (formerly Twitter) is an example of Azerbaijan’s continued appropriation policy. The video suggests that Dadivank monastery is one of the largest Caucasian Albanian heritage sites, calling it “Khudaveng monastery complex” or “Dədəvəng.” It further suggests that for centuries, Armenians have been trying to falsify history and that time has shown everyone their place.⁸²

In September 2024, Azerbaijan organized a visit for accredited diplomats and diplomatic mission members to the occupied Kashatagh region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The diplomats were accompanied by President Ilham Aliyev’s assistant, Hikmet Hajiyev. This particular visit was no exception, with Hajiyev using the occasion to promote a message, presented at Dadivank, where diplomats were introduced to the long-standing false Azerbaijani claim that Armenia had

⁷⁸ Ibid; CFTJ witness 22LC-NK0010, Testimony taken on 16 October, 2022

⁷⁹ Ibid; *Further Falsifications Regarding Dadivank and Gandzasar*, MONUMENT WATCH, <https://monumentwatch.org/en/alerts/further-falsifications-regarding-dadivank-and-gandzasar/> (Accessed January, 2025).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid; CFTJ witness 22LC-NK0010, Testimony taken on 16 October, 2022

⁸² Kəlbəcər 🇦🇷 (@Kalbajar2020), X (formerly Twitter) (3 January, 2023) <https://x.com/kalbajar2020/status/1610331563702747139> (Accessed January, 2025).

allegedly destroyed, altered, or falsified numerous cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh. As a concrete example, Hajiyev claimed that Dadivank and other monuments would be “restored” to their original state, implying that Azerbaijan would return them to their purported “original historical shape.”⁸³

Furthermore, on 25 May 2024, Azerbaijan organized an international exhibition “Albanian Christian Temples of Karabakh” in Warsaw. The exhibition was organized by the Azerbaijani Embassy in Poland, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, and the Baku International Multicultural Center. The focus of the exhibition is to present the Armenian historical Dadivank, Amaras, Gandzasar, Tsitsernavank, and several important Christian Armenian churches as Albanian. By appropriating the Armenian heritage, attributing it to the Albanians, and considering the Albanians as its ancestors, Azerbaijan is trying to rewrite history.⁸⁴

Azerbaijan’s actions are not isolated incidents but part of a long-standing policy of cultural erasure, aimed at rewriting the historical and religious landscape of Nagorno-Karabakh. Despite multiple warnings, legal rulings, and international condemnations, Azerbaijan continues to destroy and appropriate Armenian cultural heritage with impunity.

4.0 Impact on People

For those displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, these religious and cultural sites were more than just historic landmarks—they were integral to their identity, faith, and community life. The systematic destruction of these sites represents not only an attack on history but a direct assault on the people’s right to maintain their cultural and spiritual traditions.

The destruction, appropriation, and desecration of cultural and religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh have had long-lasting impacts on the emotional, spiritual, and cultural lives of the ethnic Armenians. These sites were not merely architectural landmarks but also vital centers of faith, tradition, and identity.

The emotional toll is vividly captured in the testimonies of displaced individuals. CFTJ witness 22LC-NK0010 recalls the profound sorrow of those who visited Dadivank before its transfer to Azerbaijani control:

“After hearing the news [that Dadivank had to be handed over to Azerbaijan] people who visited Dadivank were in tears, they were kissing the ground and stones. People would also stay at night.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Hikmet Hajiyev (@HikmetHajiyev), X (formerly Twitter) (18 September, 2024) https://x.com/hikmethajiyev/status/1836354194577432872?s=49&fbclid=IwY2xjawFYjOBleHRuA2FlbOIxMAABHf9yT4XuiYrjWtg-9Wm5XOP7vqNG7Ze5fX-0mwYe_cauTHSZ5IUdT1nnOg_aem_9MPAj9dsGW7W3hCy11WJ5 (Accessed January, 2025).

⁸⁴ *Armine Tigranyan: Górski Karabach – dziedzictwo kulturowe Armenii zawlaszczone przez Azerbejdżan. Wystawaw Warszawie przedstawia ormiańskie kościoły jako albańskie!*, AGENCJA INFORMACYJNA, https://agencja-informacyjna.com/dziedzictwo-zawlaszczone-azerbejdżan/?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR0O8TjAX0NwFTwwgFdq1-4rSeCXuOB6mlg2A7tS7Yyh1CsF68HczroE64Y_aem_AWj0NaGTAZ5_h15ntTi55QmkYe_xJKdCfNSjGR7Hu5AnPtFahUxtmZh_lfMBuwTNW7BMYOvk5xr106oWyYSLI6l-#armine-tigranyan-azerbejdżan-w-warszawie-przepisuje-ormianska-historie (Accessed January, 2025).

⁸⁵ Ibid. CFTJ witness 22LC-NK0010, Testimony taken on 16 October, 2022

Similarly, CFTJ witness 23LC-0035, a Nagorno-Karabakh resident, talks about the many historical and religious sites. She recalls with tears:

“It was my last birthday... in August 2020, my daughter and son-in-law took me to the Gandzasar Monastery for my birthday. It was the last birthday I ever celebrated, and it was in Gandzasar. After Gandzasar was lost, I forbade anyone to congratulate me on my birthday. I told everyone to never say that to me... Gandzasar is one of the most beautiful historical sites in Karabakh. It was magical.”⁸⁶

The witness further recalls the village of Tumi in Hadrut region, which went under Azerbaijan’s control in October 2020. She talks about the church of the village emotionally:

“The church was large. It had holy stones with old inscriptions carved into them. I remember that names were inscribed into the rocks in the old Western Armenian language, not modern Armenian, not the Karabakh dialect, but Western Armenian. The gravestones also had inscriptions in Western Armenian. I felt very calm while inside the church. There was something so mysterious and spiritual there. I would spend hours inside the church, light candles and pray, and eventually leave so relieved. I would visit the church every Sunday, and whenever I wanted... And now I am not able to go to that church.”

Beyond personal memories, the destruction of these sites also erases the collective identity of the Armenian people. Witnesses describe the significance of these landmarks as places of spiritual refuge, community gathering, and cultural preservation. CFTJ witness 23LC-0060 reflects on the symbolic importance of Ghazanchetsots Church:

“The Republic of Azerbaijan targeted and partially destroyed our white beauty — the Ghazanchetsots Church, and continues to destroy it by converting it into a mosque. It does not matter what religion one practices, there should be respect towards every religion, even if it is your enemy’s, and targeting any religious place is simply sacrilege... I would visit Ghazanchetsots so often. [The witness continues with tears] It was so beautiful, it looked like a white bride. Whenever I entered that church, I felt so calm. Ghazanchetsots was a very special place for us, Artsakhtsis [Nagorno-Karabakh residents]. Even though there are countless churches and monasteries in Artsakh, many would imagine their wedding, or baptism in Ghazanchetsots. It felt like you left the church of Ghazanchetsots purified.”⁸⁷

The witness continues recalling the Kanach Zham Church (Green Church). She states that it was her favorite church where she was baptized:

“The church is called green, because as it was an old church, over the years some moss appeared which made the church look more green, especially from afar. I was baptized

⁸⁶ CFTJ witness 23LC-0035, Testimony taken on 4 October, 2023

⁸⁷ CFTJ witness 23LC-0060, Testimony taken on 21 November, 2023

there in August 1997, and after the 2020 war, the Republic of Azerbaijan razed the church to the ground. Our green church was completely destroyed.”⁸⁸

CFTJ witness 23LC-0066 describes her childhood memories of the Shoshka Monastery in the Khachmach village of the Askeran region of Nagorno-Karabakh, emphasizing the deep-rooted connection between these sacred spaces and Armenian cultural identity:

“I have so many beautiful memories from childhood. The best ones are from the village of Khachmach, which means “a village surrounded by crosses.” And it was so, the village was surrounded by khachkars (cross-stones) and monasteries. As a kid, I would very often go to the Shoshka Monastery, which is a 13th-century Christian Monastery. We would visit the Monastery together with the relatives and pray, mostly for peace all over the world. Shoshka Monastery was very dear to my heart. We would even try to hold all our family gatherings there.”⁸⁹

The systematic destruction of cultural heritage sites has disrupted not only individual lives but also the broader cultural and historical narrative of the Armenian people. Each demolished monument, desecrated church, or vandalized gravestone represents an irreplaceable loss to humanity’s shared heritage.

5.0 Conclusion

The findings outlined in this report provide irrefutable evidence of Azerbaijan’s deliberate and systematic efforts to erase the cultural and religious heritage of the ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Through the destruction and appropriation of key Armenian religious sites such as The Church of the Holy All Saviour, St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church, Dadivank Monastery, and many others, Azerbaijan has not only violated international conventions but also inflicted lasting harm on the cultural identity of the Armenian people. These acts of cultural vandalism have intensified following the ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, as Azerbaijan’s systematic destruction of religious landmarks continues into 2024.

The legal violations of Azerbaijan’s actions are evident through a range of international conventions. Despite international norms and resolutions, Azerbaijan’s efforts to appropriate and destroy Armenian cultural heritage continue. International bodies and stakeholders must intensify their efforts to hold Azerbaijan accountable for these actions. The systematic erasure of Nagorno-Karabakh’s Armenian identity through the destruction of churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and monuments not only devastates the cultural landscape but also undermines the rights of ethnic Armenians to protect their religious, cultural, and historical heritage.

Testimonies from victims and satellite evidence underline the urgency of addressing these violations to preserve the historical and cultural integrity of Nagorno-Karabakh. The urgent need for international intervention to protect and preserve the cultural and religious heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh cannot be overstated. Immediate and coordinated international efforts are

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ CFTJ witness 23LC-0066, Testimony taken on 3 December, 2023

required to safeguard the remaining cultural sites, hold Azerbaijan accountable, and prevent the further obliteration of this irreplaceable heritage.

The preservation of cultural and religious landmarks in Nagorno-Karabakh is not merely an Armenian issue but a collective responsibility to safeguard humanity's shared heritage. Without such action, the unique identity of the Armenian people in the region risks being erased forever.