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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA

ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՅՈՒՆԵՍԿՕ-Ի ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ՀԱՆՁՆԱԺՈՂՈՎ
ARMENIAN NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR UNESCO

MEMORANDUM

**REGARDING THE PROTECTION OF ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE OF
ARTSAKH (NAGORNO-KARABAKH) AND
THE CASES OF ITS DESTRUCTION BY AZERBAIJAN**

30 April 2021

Introduction

Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) has a rich cultural heritage with more than 4.000 exquisite ancient Armenian cultural and religious sites, including 370 churches, 119 fortresses, and other historical and cultural monuments which provide material evidence for the long history of Armenians in the region. The churches of Artsakh date from the 4th to the 21st century and its valuable archaeological sites date back to the period between the 1st c. BCE – 13th c. CE.

As a result of large-scale military aggression by Azerbaijan against Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) launched on September 27, 2020, with the direct involvement of Turkey as well as foreign terrorist fighters from Syria and Libya, and following the trilateral statement on the cessation of hostilities, at least 1.456 objects of Armenian historical and cultural property have come under Azerbaijani control. It includes 161 Armenian churches, 591 khachkars (engraved cross-stones), the archaeological site of Tigranakert, the Azokh Paleolithic cave, the Nor Karmiravan tombs, Mirik, Keren, and architectural monuments such as palaces, bridges, and historic quarters. Moreover, on the territories under the Azerbaijani control, there are 8 state and 2 private museums and galleries with more than 19.000 exhibits.

Today, after almost six months since the cessation of hostilities, the fate of these monuments, religious sites, and museum exhibits remains unclear as they are under the constant threat of deliberate destruction, acts of vandalism, and desecration. There is abundant reason to believe that Azerbaijan will intentionally destroy and/or misappropriate the Armenian cultural heritage sites which are currently under its military control. This threat is well substantiated, considering Azerbaijan's practice of systematic destruction and alteration of the identity of Armenian cultural heritage sites during both peacetime and the course of the recent war.

The anti-Armenian policy of Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani hostility and disdain towards Armenian cultural heritage stem from the anti-Armenian policy pursued by Azerbaijan, which has intensified over decades. This matter has been confirmed by several independent international organizations, such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe. The ECRI has affirmed that hate speech against Armenians is a prevalent problem in Azerbaijan, and found that political leaders, educational institutions, and the media have ensured that a generation of Azerbaijanis has been imbued with this hateful anti-Armenian rhetoric¹. Azerbaijani authorities have used the dehumanization and demonization of Armenians as an instrument of propaganda to shape public opinion and create deeply rooted damaging stereotypes about Armenians. In turn, this hate speech has boosted more hostility, murders, and war crimes against Armenians based on their ethnicity.

The most recent racist and hate-generating initiative of Azerbaijan is the installation of the Military Trophies Park in Baku, dedicated to the war in Artsakh, inaugurated on April 12, 2021, with the presence of the President of Azerbaijan. The exhibits of this Park display the helmets of the fallen Armenian soldiers and wax mannequins depicting Armenian soldiers with degraded faces, some of which are shown as suffering, captured, and dying. The Park has opened its doors to Azerbaijani children, who in photos released by Azerbaijani media, are seen happily playing with the degrading displays of Armenian soldiers (Annex 1).

It is also noteworthy that the institutionalized anti-Armenian campaign of Azerbaijan deliberately targets the religious rights of the Armenian population. The vast number of Armenian churches, which came under the Azerbaijani control as a result of the Azerbaijani military aggression, remain inaccessible for the local Armenian population. The Azerbaijani government has denied the right of displaced Armenians to freely exercise their religion in churches. This stance is in violation of international law and human rights. It is important to guarantee safe access for Armenian pilgrims and religious leaders to churches and monasteries to freely exercise their right to religion and believe.

Moreover, for many years, the Azerbaijani government has been using its anti-Armenian propaganda as a tool to repress pro-democracy dissidents and peace-building activists, and their work has been continuously met by groundless accusations of having Armenian ancestry or being a part of a wider Armenian conspiracy against the Azerbaijani state. As such, activists who called for a peaceful settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were often marginalized, arrested, and sentenced to heavy prison terms.

The propaganda of Azerbaijani multiculturalism

Azerbaijani authorities often portray Azerbaijan as a beacon of multilateralism and peaceful coexistence in an otherwise intolerant and turbulent region. However, as evidence has shown, this is purely a charade put in place to appease international audiences and conceal Azerbaijan's horrific record of ethnic and religious discrimination. Therefore, the Azerbaijani claims that it is welcoming of various minority groups, are quite simply inaccurate, rendering Azerbaijan hypocritical when it accuses its neighbors of being intolerant of diversity.

¹ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). (June, 2016). Report on Azerbaijan (fifth monitoring cycle). Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-report-on-azerbaijan/16808b5581>

The country has a track record rife with examples of hate speech, intolerance, and persecution of minorities including Talysh people, Lezgin people, Udi people, and Jews. Independent research has uncovered a significant amount of antisemitism in the country as well as intolerance towards Christianity. Minority Muslim and “non-traditional” religious communities have also faced significant restrictions including police raids, police and pre-trial detention, the closing of places of worship, the ban on praying outside mosques, censorship of religious literature, and heavy penalties, as confirmed by the ECRI. Additionally, Minority Rights Group International reports that several minority communities, including the Talysh, Lezgins, Meskhetian Turks, and Kurds, have all experienced discrimination, restrictions on the ability to teach in their first languages, and harassment by local authorities².

It is noteworthy that Azerbaijan is compelling certain minority groups to take part in its anti-Armenian policy. For instance, Udis a tiny minority group of about 4 thousand people, are obliged to take part in the misappropriation campaign of Azerbaijan against Armenian religious monuments.

Intentional destruction of Armenian cultural heritage

There are numerous precedents of intentional destruction of several Armenian cultural heritage sites by Azerbaijan during and aftermath of the recent war (Annex 2). The most recent example is the complete demolition of the Armenian **Holy Mother of God Church (Zoravor Surb Astvatsatsin Church)** near the town of Mekhakavan (Jebrail), as documented by the BBC (Annex 3)³. This happened after the region fell under Azerbaijani control. The Azerbaijani side confirmed the deliberate and pre-planned nature of the full destruction of this church, which was carried out with the decision of the Azerbaijani authorities. Even during the war, the Azerbaijani military published a video that showed its soldiers cynically insulting and vandalizing the Armenian church (Annex 4).

Moreover, on April 19 the Caucasus Heritage Watch shared satellite images showing several vehicles parked next to the **Vankasar Church** in Aghdam district that came under the control of Azerbaijan after the trilateral statement (Annex 5)⁴. The demolition of the Holy Mother of God Church near Mekhakavan (Jebrail) justifies fears that Vankasar Church could also be demolished. Additionally, the ruins of Tigranakert – the significant Hellenistic and Armenian archaeological site of an ancient city founded by Tigranes the Great in 95-55 BCE – can be found less than 2 kilometers from Vankasar Church. During the war, it became an area of intensive war activity and was shelled several times, proving yet again the complete disdain of Azerbaijani authorities towards even the most remarkable sites of cultural heritage which belong not only to Armenians but also to the whole world (Annex 6).

Furthermore, recent satellite imagery, as well as photos, and a video circulating on social media, have confirmed that the **200-years-old Church of Saint John the Baptist (St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church, popularly known as Kanach Zham)** in the city of Shushi of Artsakh currently under the Azerbaijani control has been partially demolished (Annex 7). It is in the same city of Shushi where another Armenian church, **the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots**

² Minority Rights Group International. (March, 2018). *Azerbaijan - current issues*. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/country/azerbaijan/>

³ *Nagorno-Karabakh: The mystery of the missing church*, Jonah Fisher, (25 March 2021). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-56517835>

⁴ Information published on the Caucasus Heritage Watch Twitter account (20 April 2021). Available at: <https://twitter.com/CaucasusHW/status/1384250585742909444?s=20>

Cathedral – a historic and religious symbol – was struck twice by precise striking drones on October 8, 2020, emphasizing their intentional nature. The attack destroyed one of the two domes of the Cathedral, constituting a blatant violation of the Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict⁵. Further evidence has also emerged that the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral has been vandalized and the second dome damaged during peacetime, long after the statement that put an end to the hostilities has been signed (Annex 8).

The constant shelling and fire by the Azerbaijani armed forces on civilian settlements made it impossible for museum and heritage professionals to ensure the safety and protection of the collections. This includes **8 state museums and galleries with more than 19.000 exhibits**, as well as two private museums (The "Shushi Carpet Museum" and the "Shushi Armenian Money Museum") which are located in the areas currently under the military control of Azerbaijan. These museums showcase the history, religion, and creativity of the Armenians of Artsakh. Unfortunately, Armenians have neither access to these museums, nor information about the fate of the collections (Annex 9).

Finally, it is important to note that Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian cultural heritage cannot be contained within times of conflict. The flagrant example is the total destruction of all Armenian cultural monuments in Nakhichevan, including the ancient Armenian cemetery of Julfa between 1997-2006, in which a total of 28.000 objects of Armenian cultural property (89 medieval churches, 5.840 unique hand-carved khachkars (cross-stones), and 22,000 ancient tombstones) were annihilated. Many photos and videos are showing the destruction of the Armenian cultural heritage (Annex 10)⁶.

This heinous policy of barbaric destruction of the places of worship comes to prove again that Azerbaijan has so far consolidated its position as a pioneer in the destruction of the Christian Armenian heritage.

Misappropriation of Armenian cultural heritage

The danger faced by Armenian monuments under the military control of Azerbaijan is not limited to destruction; misappropriation and misidentification of this cultural property is also a significant risk.

Azerbaijan, at the highest level of leadership, has resorted to a deplorable practice of falsifying historical facts and appropriating the religious and cultural values of the Armenian people. Azerbaijan strives to rewrite history and deny the historical roots of Armenian heritage by claiming that Armenian churches and khachkars belong to Caucasian Albania. The latter was a historical polity situated in the north of the river Kura (in the Shaki, Qakh, Oghuz, Qabala, and Ismayilli districts of present-day Azerbaijan and southern Dagestan in the Russian Federation), and ceased to exist in the 8th century. The population of historical Caucasian Albania consisted of more than two dozen ethnic groups, none of which were title-bearing people nor had the identity of "Caucasian Albanian".

⁵ Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 26 March 1999, UNESCO Doc. HC/1999/7.

⁶ Simon Maghakyan, Sarah Pickman. (February 18, 2019). *A Regime Conceals Its Erasure of Indigenous Armenian Culture*. Hyperallergic Independent Art Journal. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>

Nowadays the Udi people, among others, are descendants of Caucasian Albanians, and about 4000 Udis currently live in Azerbaijan. Although Udis have been closely associated with Armenian culture and the church, their area of residence is located hundreds of kilometers from Artsakh. Azerbaijani authorities have been attempting to use this minority group to implement their despicable policy of cultural eradication, and circulating false narratives about a so-called “Albanian Church”. These attempts to misappropriate Armenian churches are nothing but malignant manipulation of a vulnerable minority.

Furthermore, presenting the Armenian churches as Caucasian Albanian is, in fact, an intermediate step towards "Azerbaijanizing" them, taking into account Azerbaijan's claims of being a descendant of Caucasian Albanians. Ethnographic, archaeological, and anthropological research has proven this to be false. No feature of identity including religion, language or ethnonym can attest to the mere similarity of these ancient Caucasian people to that of Turkic Azerbaijanis. The aim of this faulty thesis is to eradicate the Armenian peoples' historical roots in the region and thereby diminish their entitlement to live in and organize their lives in these areas, while also fabricating an Azerbaijani historical presence. This systemic “Albanization/ Azerbaijanization” of Armenian cultural property quite evidently constitutes historical revisionism by Azerbaijan.

The latest evidence of this policy was exhibited during the recent visit of President Aliyev to the occupied territories of Artsakh. On March 15th, President Aliyev visited the **17th-century Armenian Church in the village of Tsakuri in the Hadrut region of Artsakh** and announced in public that he considers Armenian-language inscriptions on the walls of the Church to be “fake” and he intends to “repair” the Albanian church. Ultimately, this means that the Armenian inscriptions will be removed. This is not an unprecedented act, given the controversial restoration of the Church in the town of Nij in the Gabala region by the Azerbaijani authorities, during which, the Armenian-language inscriptions on the walls of the Church were erased (Annex 11).

The misappropriation of Armenian cultural heritage is not limited to places of worship; Azerbaijan has also been attempting to usurp the Armenian tradition of carpet weaving. Armenian carpets have been revered in the Christian West for over five hundred years now, and Artsakh was one of the key centers of Armenian carpet weaving culture. Artsakh carpets reflect the rich traditions of Armenian carpet weaving as well as the artistic and semantic features typical of different eras, thus serving as the best evidence of the centuries-old history of the indigenous Armenian people (Annex 12).

Nevertheless, Azerbaijani authorities do not recognize the historical role played by Armenians in the rich history of carpet weaving, continuing to allege that Armenian carpet weaving traditions are just a reflection of the Azerbaijani art form, thus appropriating Armenian carpet weaving culture and ascribing it to Azerbaijan. Taking this a step further, Azerbaijani authorities have also come forward with absurd claims of cultural looting concerning the evacuation of some of the most unique and precious exhibits of Armenian carpet art from the Shushi Carpet Museum, even though this was the only way to save the collection from harm caused by constant Azerbaijani bombardment.

The Azerbaijani Government's institutionalized campaign of destruction and misappropriation of the vast Armenian cultural heritage in Artsakh is a blatant violation of UNESCO 1954 Hague Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017), which emphasizes “that the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, and the looting and smuggling of cultural property in the event of armed conflicts, notably by terrorist groups, and the attempt

to deny historical roots and cultural diversity in this context can fuel and exacerbate conflict and hamper post-conflict national reconciliation, thereby undermining the security, stability, governance, social, economic and cultural development of affected States.” The international community should univocally condemn such acts and make efforts to protect the Azerbaijani-controlled Armenian cultural heritage which belongs to the whole of humanity.

International efforts

The Azerbaijani policy of cultural cleansing, reinforced over decades, has deeply tarnished the credibility of Azerbaijan, precluding the possibility of relying on neither the statements of the Azerbaijani authorities nor the statistics published by Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan has stalled the proposal of UNESCO to carry out an independent mission of experts to draw a preliminary inventory of significant cultural properties as a first step towards the effective safeguarding of the region’s heritage. While the proposal has received the full support of Armenia, Artsakh, the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, and the Intergovernmental Committee of the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its Second Protocol (1999), Azerbaijan, on the other hand, has tried to politicize the issue by creating obstacles against the effective engagement of UNESCO and distorting the scope and purpose of the proposed mission. This course of action by Azerbaijan is not conducive to the creation of an environment of confidence.

Additionally, by inviting the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) to conduct a technical mission in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict area that is under the military control of Azerbaijan, rather than UNESCO, the Azerbaijani authorities have effectively added religious undertones to the issue of the protection of cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage is the shared wealth of all humanity, regardless of its religious, ethnic, or historical background. The loss of cultural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world, and not only the nation to which the cultural property belongs. In fact, the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, ratified by Azerbaijan since 1993, states the following:

“Considering that the existing international conventions, recommendations, and resolutions concerning cultural and natural property demonstrate the importance, for whatever people it may belong...”

Azerbaijan, with its misappropriation campaign, the record of the destruction of cultural property in Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh, and reluctance to accept the application of internationally recognized instruments cannot be qualified responsible enough to value and protect the Armenian cultural and historical monuments that have come under its military control. The international community must step up and consolidate its efforts to prevent yet another cultural genocide from taking place at the hands of the same perpetrators.

Annex 1 – Baku War Trophy Park

1.1. An exhibit featuring models of Armenian prisoners of war



1.2.Children play at Baku War Trophy Park



Annex 2 – Acts of vandalism committed after the trilateral statement

2.1. Vandalizing the Statue of Vazgen Sargsyan in Shushi



2.2. Vandalizing cultural monuments in Talish

2016-2017



2020



2.3. An Azerbaijani while removing the Armenian engraved scripts in Talish



2.4. Azerbaijani soldier vandalizes the Christian icons



2.5. Vandalized tombs on the territories under the control of Azerbaijan



2.6. Act of vandalism in the Arakel village of the Hadrut region currently occupied by Azerbaijan



2.7. Bulldozing the Armenian statue in the occupied territories of Artsakh



2.8. Another case of Azerbaijani vandalism – a khachkar was destroyed in Ukhtadzor, Hadrut region



Annex 3 - Armenian Holy Mother of God Church (Zoravor Surb Astvatsatsin Church) near the town of Mekhakavan (Jebrail) has been demolished

2017



2021



Annex 4 – Armenian Holy Mother of God Church (Zoravor Surb Astvatsatsin Church) near the town of Mekhakavan (Jebrail) was vandalized and insulted by Azerbaijani soldier before being demolished



Annex 5 - Caucasus Heritage Watch shared satellite images showing several vehicles parked next to the Vankasar Church in the Aghdam district



Azerbaijani flag was placed on the dome of the Vankasar Church right after Aghdam district came under the control of Azerbaijan

Annex 6 – Tigranakert excavation sites

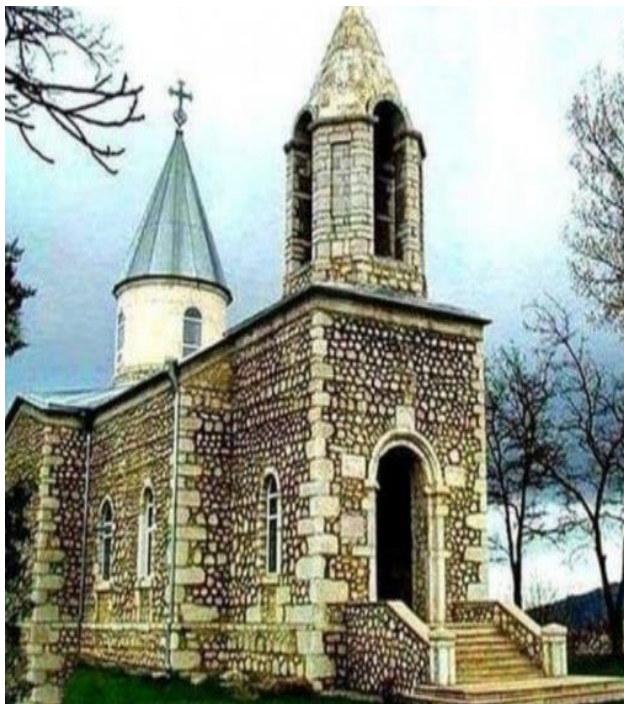


6.1. Damage to the archaeological camp of Tigranakert by a targeted Azerbaijani strike



Annex 7 – Saint John the Baptist Church (St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church, popularly known as Kanach Zham) in the city of Shushi currently under Azerbaijani control has been partially demolished

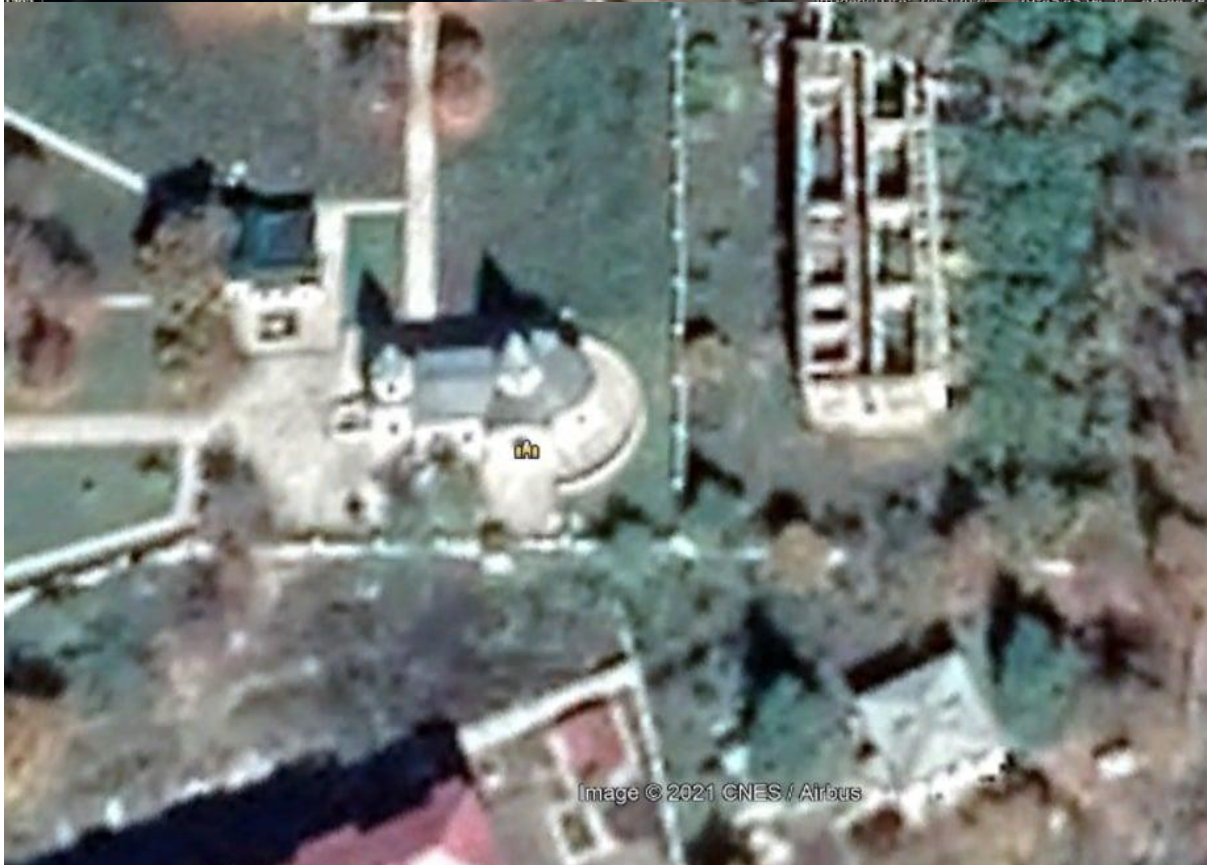
Before



After



7.1. Satellite images showing the destruction of Saint John the Baptist Church (St. Hovhannes Mkrtych Church) in Shushi



Annex 8 – Attacks on the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral of Shushi





8.1 Acts of vandalism committed against the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral of Shushi after the trilateral statement



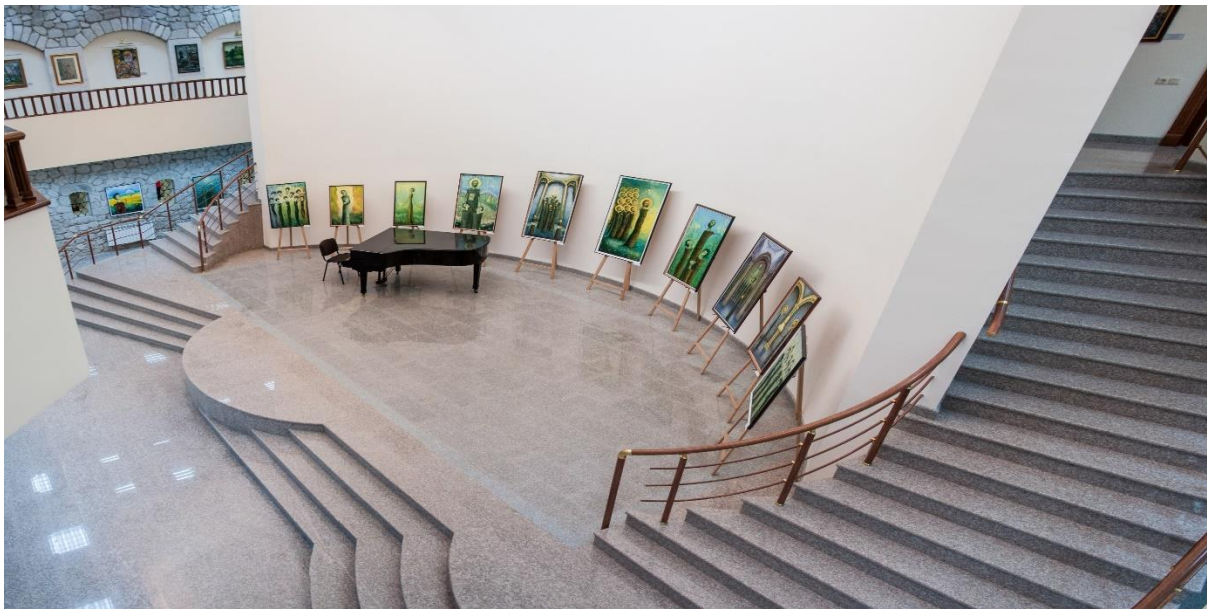
8.2. Statues of angles on the gates of the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral of Shushi were destroyed



Annex 9 – The list and photos of state museums currently under the military control of Azerbaijan

1. State Museum of Fine Arts
2. State Museum of Geology after Professor G. Gabrielyants
3. Shushi Museum of History
4. Shushi Art Gallery
5. State Archaeological Museum of Kashatagh
6. Hadrut Local Lore Museum After Arthur Mkrtchyan
7. Mets Tagher Museum after A. Khanperiyants
8. Tumi Museum after Tevan Stepanyan

Annex 9.1. State Museum of Fine Arts in Shushi



Annex 9.2. State Museum of Geology after Professor G. Gabrielyants in Shushi



Annex 10 – The destruction of the Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhijevan

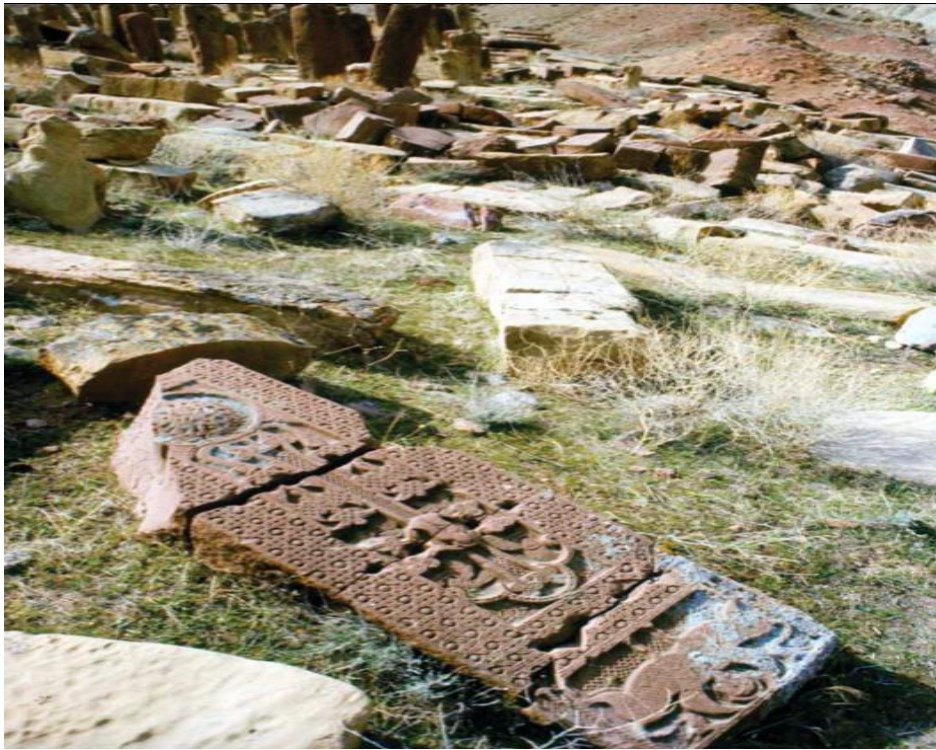
10.1. The Armenian cemetery of Old Julfa, circa 1915



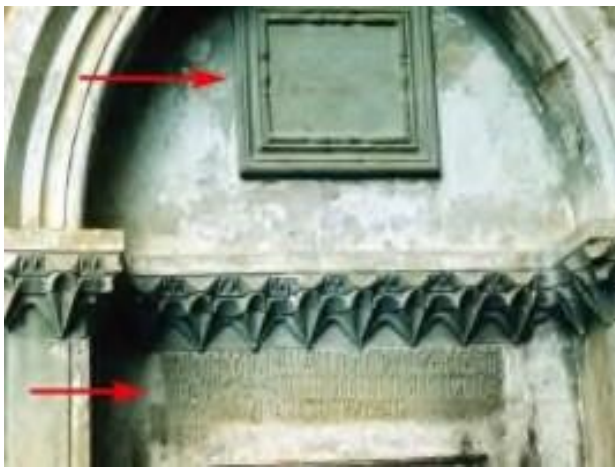
10.2. Military "firing range" in place of the destroyed cemetery in Julfa (photos showing the situation before and after)



10.3. Azerbaijani soldiers bulldozing the Cemetery of Old Julfa in 2005



Annex 11 – The erasure of Armenian inscriptions from the Church of Nij



Annex 12 – The map of carpet-making culture in the 19th-20th centuries in Artsakh

