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“Caucasus Heritage Watch”: The Biased Reporting of the Pro-Armenian Propaganda Group

📍 Mirzə İbrahimov 8, AZ1005, Bakı, Azərbaycan

📞 (+994 12) 596-82-39, (+994 12) 596-82-41

🌐 www.aircenter.az, E-mail: info@aircenter.az

AUGUST 2023

After the Second Karabakh war, one of the main discourses of the propaganda in pro-Armenian circles was allegations of the “destruction of Armenian cultural heritage” in the liberated Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Although the fate of cultural heritage is very important and remains a sensitive subject in the narratives of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the scholarly and expert community should be wary of one-sided accusations.

From the onset of the conflict in 1987–1988, the Western media favored the Armenian narrative, including claims about cultural heritage. This discourse was determined by the Orientalist perspective on the conflict, which privileged Christian heritage over the Islamic. During the thirty years of the Armenian occupation, numerous Azerbaijani and Islamic monuments became dilapidated or were purposefully destroyed without much coverage from Western media outlets.

The Second Karabakh War of 2020 brought the fate of the region’s cultural heritage into the media spotlight. A number of leading international media outlets widely circulated claims regarding the purported destruction of Armenian churches by the Azerbaijani army.¹

In June 2023, the US-based organization Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) issued the fifth edition of its highly partisan “Nagorno-Karabakh Monitoring Report,” accusing Azerbaijan of destroying, damaging, and otherwise threatening Armenian cultural heritage in the Karabakh region. The organization claims to create its reports according to information purportedly collected using “high-resolution satellite imagery.” The report identifies “eight historical Armenian objects” allegedly deliberately destroyed by the Azerbaijani military after the liberation of Karabakh, but conspicuously avoids any mention of the countless items of Azerbaijani cultural heritage vandalized during the years of occupation. This is unsurprising, considering the five man “research team” of the organization includes three Armenians and that **three out of the six sponsors of the “research” were Armenian organizations such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Aragats Foundation and the USC Institute of Armenian Studies.**

Perhaps to assuage reasonable concerns about its lack of impartiality, the organization published a special report in April 2023 regarding the Armenian treatment of Azerbaijani heritage during the 30 years of occupation. Unsurprisingly, the material does not reflect even half of the damage caused by Armenians in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Moreover – and worse – **the report falsely states that most Azerbaijani historical monuments “remained untouched” during the years of the occupation,** that damaging historical monuments has never been a part of Armenian state policy, and that “there was no attempt to systematically erase the material of Azerbaijani history and cultural life,”² which does not remotely reflect the reality of the situation.

According to the most recent report of the CHW, eight pieces of “Armenian heritage” have been “destroyed,” ten “damaged” and more than twenty “threatened” by the Azerbaijani side since the

¹ *Nagorno-Karabakh: Armenia accuses Azerbaijan of targeting cathedral* (2020) BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54465172> (Accessed: 28 June 2023).

² Ghulyan, H. et al. (2023) *CHW Special Report #2 Between the Wars: A Satellite Investigation of the Treatment of Azerbaijani Cultural Heritage in the Unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, 1994-2020*. rep. Ithaca, New York: Caucasus Heritage Watch, p. 4. Available at: <https://indd.adobe.com/view/b0199bf1-a58a-4395-a84f-1f3d0ea84f68> (Accessed: 23 June 2023).

liberation of the occupied territories. Many such fabricated claims, rooted in the misinformation promoted by Armenian propagandists and completely contrary to the real attitude of the Azerbaijani side towards the historical and religious heritage of the region, were confidently put forward in the report as facts.

According to the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, states are only considered guilty of the destruction of cultural heritage when they **purposefully** destroy historical monuments,³ such as when, for example, Armenia engaged in vandalism to erase the cultural heritage of Azerbaijanis during the 30-year occupation of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. During the Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani Armed Forces took great care to avoid hitting religious buildings and other civilian targets. Although some occasional collateral damage occurred during the hostilities, the Azerbaijani side expressed its commitment to restore all religious monuments damaged during the war.

As a matter of record, an Armenian church stands in the capital of Azerbaijan. The Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, built in 1869 and located in the very center of the city next to Fountain Square, is preserved to this day as a historical and cultural monument of great national importance.

Nevertheless, the Armenian press regularly circulates falsified evidence to promulgate misinformation about pieces of Armenian “cultural heritage” subjected to “looting and appropriation” by Azerbaijanis. When Azerbaijan expressed its intention to restore the Gazanchi Church in the liberated city of Shusha in 2021, which had received some collateral damage during the military hostilities, Armenians then turned to accusations of “appropriation” of an “Armenian” church. The relevant Azerbaijani state agencies are continuing restoration work on this church in Shusha.

Similar smears appeared in Armenian media regarding the “appropriation” of the Holy Ascension Church in the Lachin district of Azerbaijan.⁴ **The building of this church in 1998 during the period of occupation was illegal**, as the construction of places of worship, including churches, on the legal territory of Azerbaijan is regulated by international legislation. Any construction without the permission of the relevant authorities is blatantly unlawful.

It is interesting that, according to some claims of Armenian experts, the number of new “Armenian churches” discovered in the Karabakh region is approaching 190 – a dramatic increase that exceeds the total number of new churches built in the whole of Armenia.⁵ The characterization of the newly built churches and appropriated monuments as “historical heritage” **is a violation of the relevant provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention** and the national law of Azerbaijan.

³ 1954 convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of armed conflict, UNESCO. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/protecting-heritage/convention-and-protocols/1954-convention> (Accessed: 29 June 2023).

⁴ Twitter account: @301arm (2023). Available at: <https://twitter.com/301arm/status/1672213385662922752> (Accessed: 25 June 2023)

⁵ Abdullayeva, S. (2015) *Armenian churches increased in occupied territories of Azerbaijan*, Report News Agency. Available at: <https://report.az/en/karabakh/armenian-churches-increase-in-occupied-territories-of-azerbaijan/> (Accessed: 29 June 2023)

Since November 3, 2020, the State Service for the Protection, Development and Restoration of Cultural Heritage under the Ministry of Culture of Azerbaijan began a preliminary inventory of monuments in the liberated territories. In this, 433 of 706 state-registered historical and cultural monuments, 182 *objects* (newly discovered monuments) with historical, architectural, and archaeological significance located in these areas, and 864 *cultural* institutions were inspected. **During this exercise, it was discovered that most of the monuments had been deliberately destroyed, burned, appropriated, or otherwise defaced;** despicable acts had been committed in places of important religious and spiritual value, such as cemeteries, mosques, and tombs; original architectural features of a number of historical and cultural monuments were intentionally and purposefully altered; and monuments were contemptuously used for military purposes in order to deny and distort their ethnic identity. As a result of the Armenian occupation, historical monuments, museums, books, manuscripts, and archives belonging to the people of Azerbaijan were looted and ruined. The worst examples of immovable cultural heritage destroyed by the Armenian armed forces were Islamic religious monuments – mosques, tombs, and other places of faith razed to the ground.⁶ Most of the historical monuments located in the liberated territories were destroyed and subjected to acts of theft and vandalism. Many monuments have been completely erased from the earth.⁷ **The fact that none of the above was mentioned in the report published by CHW proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the biased attitude of the organization.**

The information war waged by Armenia and the diaspora against Azerbaijan is still ongoing, despite the end of the armed conflict. While the AIR Center acknowledges the necessity of working towards the protection of the cultural heritage of both ethnic groups – Armenians and Azerbaijanis – the main purpose of Armenian nationalists remains the distortion and falsification of facts, and the concealment of, and misdirection from, its own serious crimes. Unfortunately, some states, non-state organizations, media institutions, and other platforms have been duped into contributing to these underhand tactics of the Armenian nationalists by expressing their “concerns” about the destruction of Christian religious monuments in the Karabakh region. **The CHW and its report are among the many products of the Armenian propaganda machine.**

⁶ *ARMENIA’S APPROPRIATION OF AZERBAIJANI CULTURAL AND HISTORIC HERITAGE (2021)*, Center of Analysis of International Relations. Available at: <https://aircenter.az/uploads/files/Cultural%20Appropriation.pdf> (Accessed: 25 June 2023)

⁷ *The restoration of the Gazanchy church in Shusha demonstrates the care of the Azerbaijani state for not only its own cultural heritage, but also for the Christian heritage as a whole - news: Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2021)*, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Available at: <https://culture.gov.az/en/common-news/13571> (Accessed: 25 June 2023)