

Statement
on
Threats to the Cultural Heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

Issue

The Nagorno-Karabakh region contains some of the world's earliest Christian structures, including churches, monuments, and khachkars (carved cross stones). Some of the structures in the region, such as the Amaras monastery and the Basilica of Tsitsernayank, date to the early centuries of Christianity. It is also a heavily disputed region in the ongoing Armenian - Azeri conflict, which only came under cease-fire in November 2020. The cultural heritage of the region is heavily contested, and much has already been lost to war, vandalism, and intentional destruction.

There are many examples of cultural monuments and sites that were adopted by the new regime. The Pantheon in Rome was adopted by the Catholic Church in the 7th Century. After the fall of Constantinople, Mehmed II the Conqueror preserved Hagia Sophia as a mosque. But many cultural monuments and sites in contested areas become victims of the conflict, as one culture seeks to dominate or eradicate another. The SAH fears that the Nagorno-Karabakh region may suffer this fate.

Background

Seven regions of Nagorno-Karabakh will come under the control of the predominantly Muslim Azeri, according to a cease-fire agreement reached in November 2020. Under the cease-fire, hundreds of thousands of Azeri displaced by war in the 1990s will be able to return. Repeating a theory that began spreading through Azeri and Turkish channels beginning in the 1970s, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliev, in a speech on November 25, 2020, asserted that Armenians have no historical claim to the region. Aliev has stated that the churches actually belonged to ancient Azerbaijani forebears and had been "Armenianized" in the 19th century, although there is no historical evidence of an Azeri connection to Armenian churches.

Armenian forces destroyed the Azeri town of Agdam in the wake of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in the 1990s. The Azeri government also claimed that mosques and Muslim sites under Armenian control were neglected or vandalized. Between 1997 and 2006, the Azeri government undertook a devastating campaign against Armenian cultural heritage in Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani enclave isolated from the main part of the country by Armenian territory. Nakhichevan - the name in Armenian translates as "the place of descent," a biblical Armenian reference to Noah's Ark - is historically an Armenian region with a predominantly Armenian population. The Armenian population of Nakhichevan has been subjected to repeated massacres since before World War I, forced to relocate due to Ottoman persecution of Armenians, and later expelled by Azerbaijan when it was established by the Soviet Union. Some 89 churches and thousands of khachkars were destroyed. In spite of the recent cease fire, there are indications that churches and monuments continue to be vandalized.

In wartime, the preservation of monuments must necessarily be prioritized below the protection of human life. We argue, however, that the protection of these cultural sites is important as well, as they can become instruments for a long-term peace.

To date, international efforts to protect monuments have focused on damage resulting from acts of war and terrorist violence. Following the widespread destruction of museums, libraries, and artwork during World War

II, diplomats drafted the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which was eventually ratified by more than 130 countries. That treaty, of course, had a significant loophole: vaguely-defined "military necessity" was exempted.

Since the end of the Cold War, repeated and deliberate attacks on an adversary's monuments have forced world leaders and international organizations to add additional protections to the existing legal framework. The audacity and destruction of such acts as the Croatian shelling of the Old Bridge at Mostar, Bosnia (1993), the Taliban's detonation of the giant sandstone Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan (2001), and the Islamic State's destruction of Yazidi shrines in Iraq (2014-15) illustrate this ongoing threat to sacred sites around the globe. In response, the International Criminal Court was established in 2002 to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. For the first time, the intentional destruction of cultural heritage was included. In 2008, following the looting and damage to sites in Iraq during the American invasion and occupation, the United States Senate finally approved the 1954 Hague Convention -- a mere 54 years late.

Recommendation

The recent, deliberate destruction and vandalism of these internationally significant cultural sites is deeply disturbing. Equally disturbing is the knowledge that the damage continues as a result of ongoing armed conflict as well as the cloud of collateral activities, including vandalism, looting, and theft, that occur in its wake. The loss of these sites, many of which are internationally significant, will forever separate us from our collective past.

SAH strongly endorses and supports all efforts to protect, document, salvage, and restore the cultural heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh region threatened by warfare, looting, and organized destruction. SAH joins with the World Monuments Fund (WMF), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), ALIPH, Blue Shield International, and other international organizations in calling for a path forward that respects the many distinct, rich layers of cultural heritage in the region. The documentation of this threatened heritage is essential, as is a long-term strategy that seeks to retain and conserve them.

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