
Present-Day Ethnocide: The Destruction of Armenian Cultural Heritage in Azerbaijan

Kasey Roberts

Abstract: Ongoing conflict in the Caucasus over both land claims and ethnic prejudice between Armenia and Azerbaijan has perpetuated the destruction of cultural heritage sites in the region. In particular, the Azerbaijani government has successfully eliminated an Armenian religious landmark, Julfa Cemetery, which had previously been home to the largest number of *khachkar* tombstones in the world. Following the demolition of Julfa Cemetery, the Azerbaijani government denied that the cemetery had ever existed. This denial is not unique to the instance of Julfa Cemetery and the *khachkars*, but rather serves as an example of a pattern of behavior that seeks to rewrite the cultural history of Azerbaijan to intentionally exclude ethnic Armenians who had resided within Azeri borders for centuries. These occurrences, in addition to significant anti-Armenian prejudice in Azerbaijan, indicates a substantial desire to erase the cultural heritage of Armenians both inside Azerbaijan and across the diaspora. In order to establish this evidence, I examined reports from various non-governmental organizations operating in and around the Caucasus, works from historians and genocide scholars, as well as journalistic accounts published in both notable news sources and independent journals. However, it is important to note that a large amount of factually ambiguous works are published by Azeris, Armenians, and their governments which makes the study of this issue complex. Nevertheless, with this evidence established, this paper will argue that the actions of the Azerbaijani government at Julfa Cemetery and across Azerbaijan constitute ethnocide in which a dominant power seeks to eradicate the cultural identity of a group.

Introduction

While present-day Armenia is known as a relatively small nation-state in Eurasia, the land boundaries of Armenia have encompassed much of the Caucasus region throughout its 2600 year history, including current-day Turkey, Azerbaijan, Syria, and Iran. As a result of these fluid land boundaries, Armenian monuments, churches, gravesites, and other cultural artifacts have been found across much of the region. Yet, in the years since the Armenian Genocide (1915-1917), many of these sites— particularly in Azerbaijan— have disappeared. The Azerbaijani government has categorically denied any involvement and has also sometimes denied the existence of Armenian cultural heritage sites altogether. Because of this, the exact quantity of Armenian cultural heritage lost is impossible to know, although one researcher claims that almost 90 churches as well as nearly 30,000 cross and tombstones have been destroyed

(Maghakyan and Pickman 2019). Perhaps the most well-documented and widely-discussed instance of this cultural loss is the destruction of Julfa Cemetery in the Nakhchivan region of Azerbaijan from 1997 to 2006 which once housed the largest collection of *khachkar* tombstones surviving from the 16th century (Womack 2019). Following the flattening of Julfa Cemetery, Azerbaijani government officials denied the existence of the site. The pattern of cultural destruction and subsequent denial in addition to sustaining anti-Armenian sentiment in Azerbaijan indicates that the demolition of Julfa Cemetery and other Armenian cultural heritage is part of a concentrated effort on behalf of the Azeri government to erase Armenian culture from Azerbaijan. Considering this evidence, it can be concluded that the actions of Azerbaijan at Julfa Cemetery and elsewhere within Azeri borders constitute a form of violent cultural destruction known as ethnocide.

Historical Background

Armenians are no stranger to culture loss. During the Armenian Genocide, the Ottomans burned and destroyed Armenian churches, tortured Armenians with crucifixes, killed Armenian intellectuals, and forced Christians to convert to Islam (Balakian 2013). Raphael Lemkin, the originator of the term “Armenian Genocide” and architect of the Genocide Convention, said in an interview in 1959:

“In terms of the larger issues involved, the losses in culture through the genocide of the Armenian people in Turkey were staggering. The Armenians, as the intellectual core of Turkey, were in possession of valuable personal libraries, archives, and historical manuscripts . . . Churches, convents, and monuments of artistic and historical value were destroyed” (Lemkin 1959).

Through the destruction of centers of culture and heritage, Armenians lost more than family members to the genocide; they also lost a significant and irreplaceable sense of self and community (Balakian 2013). It is of note that Armenian churches did not solely exist as a house of worship, but rather a hub of life for Armenians; they housed ancient artifacts, manuscripts, artwork, and records that validated Armenian presence in the region dating back centuries (Balakian 2013). The oppressive Ottoman forces aimed to destroy Armenians’ sense of belonging to a space both in terms of cultural belonging and claims to ancestral land by destroying central institutions in Armenian culture. Without remnants of Armenian culture and people in the region, this genocidal government could insist that they had never existed there in the first place.

Following their conquest by the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union annexed Armenia in 1920. At first, Armenia existed as part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, or the TSFSR (Mints 2021). In 1936, the TSFSR was split into its constituent parts: Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. While Soviet rule was a relatively peaceful time for Armenians, they came into conflict with their Azeri neighbors during the 1980s as the autonomous district of Nagorno-Karabakh (known in Armenia as

Artsakh) clashed with their controlling power, Azerbaijan (Mints 2021). Nagorno-Karabakh was (and remains in the present-day) a majority-Armenian region situated between Azerbaijan and Armenia, although it was granted to Azerbaijan during the division of land in 1936. Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh demanded reunification with Armenia, but were ultimately unsuccessful (BBC News). This conflict served as both an indicator of divided heritage for ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan and an instigator for further tensions between the two nations.

By the end of Soviet rule and the establishment of Azerbaijan and Armenia as independent states, the two countries maintained significant cultural and political disagreements. In 1992, Armenia and Azerbaijan went to war over Nagorno-Karabakh, both vying for control of the region (Mints 2021). A cease-fire was reached in 1994, although fighting persisted and continues to break out sporadically through the years as tensions still run high. There is, however, reason to believe that this conflict is driven by more complex tensions than those originating from land claims.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published multiple reports on Azerbaijan and noted a general “negative attitude towards Armenians” (ECRI 2016). ECRI wrote:

“Political leaders, educational institutions and media have continued using hate speech against Armenians; an entire generation of Azerbaijanis has now grown up listening to this hateful rhetoric. Human rights activists working inter alia towards reconciliation with Armenia have been sentenced to heavy prison terms on controversial accusations” (ECRI 2016).

In response, Azerbaijan’s government submitted comments that rejected this allegation, despite such anti-Armenian sentiment being noted in each of the five reports (ECRI 2016). They claimed that the ECRI chose to give way to false assessments and inaccurate sources that describe conditions for minorities living in Azerbaijan (ECRI 2016). Furthermore, following the murder of an Armenian soldier by an Azeri man in Hungary in 2012 and a criminal conviction, the Azerbaijani government pardoned the convict and was even publicly praised as “heroic” (ECRI 2016). It is evident that there existed and remains significant anti-Armenian sentiment held by both the Azerbaijani government as well as some prominent members of the public for several decades spanning the course of ECRI reports.

Destruction of Julfa Cemetery

With political and cultural tensions high following the war over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani government began executing a series of destructive acts in 1997 in the autonomous republic of Nakhchivan, which is under the control of Azerbaijan (Womack 2019). This area housed churches and other sites significant to the cultural heritage of Armenians, one of the most prominent of these being Julfa Cemetery.. Here, around 5,000 *khachkars* and an estimated 22,000 other tombstones stood to mark the 16th century graves of ethnic Armenians (Abramian 2021). In Armenian culture, *Khachkars* are not

only grave markers, but pieces of highly unique, ornate art that also serve a religious purpose as a connection between the human and the divine that are sometimes displayed in the home as well as in religious sanctuaries (UNESCO 2010). In 1998, removal of 800 *khachkars* from Julfa cemetery began, initiating the beginning of the demolition of the site (International Council on Monuments and Sites 2011). Though most sources are unsure of the mechanism by which these monuments were destroyed, one bystander reports that men dressed in Azerbaijani military uniforms shattered the *khachkars* with sledgehammers and discarded the remnants in a river along the Azerbaijan-Iran border (Chapple 2020). In reaction, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ordered the halt of Julfa's deconstruction in 2000, but two years later, demolition began once again (International Council on Monuments and Sites 2011). By 2005, eyewitness accounts reported that the cemetery had been completely deconstructed along with the historic *khachkars* that marked thousands of grave sites (Maghakyan and Pickman 2019). This was confirmed by satellite images published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) that showed Julfa Cemetery in 2003 and 2009 with the latter image depicting the area flattened and bare (AAAS 2010). When the Consul General of Azerbaijan to the Western United States was asked to comment on the destruction of the cemetery, he replied that the cemetery's desecration was "a figment of Armenia's imagination" (Womack 2019). The campaign of frequent denial by the Azerbaijan government has become so pervasive that many Azeris have come to believe it as well. Indeed, commenters on an article about Julfa Cemetery have claimed that photo evidence has been "photoshopped" and that ancient Armenian sites are actually those of Christian Albanians-- a commonly cited narrative meant to deny Armenian historical presence in Azerbaijan (Maghakyan and Pickman 2019).

This response is not unique to Julfa Cemetery. Scottish researcher, Steven Sims, visited Azerbaijan in 2005 to locate and assess the state of Armenian churches only to find the plots vacant and was later detained by Azeri authorities (Maghakyan and Pickman 2019). Sims recalled that the police denied that Armenians had ever existed in this area and that perhaps images Sims had seen had been edited by Armenians (Maghakyan and Pickman 2019).

At this juncture, it is imperative to note the limitations in knowledge surrounding the destruction of Julfa Cemetery. Throughout the research process, sources originating in Azerbaijan were found to have followed the pattern of denial of their government, despite significant evidence to the contrary. Armenian sources also tended to emphasize the harms of the Azerbaijani government while labeling Azeris the sole perpetrators of violence and disregarding the complexity of the history of Armenian-Azeri conflict. The research was also limited by the lack of mainstream news coverage of events in the Caucasus from sources in the United States and European states, save for reports of the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh. These limitations only serve to reinforce the nature of culture loss and ethnic tensions in

Armenia and Azerbaijan. When a government perpetuates a campaign of denial, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern the truth. The creation of confusion combined with apathy on the part of Western nations only serves to benefit the oppressive force.

Analysis

The loss of Armenian cultural heritage has already been felt widely by Armenians living within Azerbaijan. The success of the strategic goal of cultural destruction-- to eliminate a sense of belonging and revoke connection to the land-- has contributed to a broader structural problem of Armenians essentially living in secrecy in Azerbaijan. The 2011 ECRI report found that those of mixed Azeri-Armenian descent have frequently chosen to abandon their Armenian last names in fear of becoming the subject of hatred or structural discrimination (ECRI 2011). Beyond those living within the political boundaries of Azerbaijan, practicing Christians in Armenia see the demolition of Julfa Cemetery as not only a desecration of grave sites, but also a deep disrespect of their religious connection to the *khachkar*. Julfa Cemetery's loss means the elimination of the single largest collection of *khachkars* worldwide and the destruction of sacred spaces for Apostolic Armenians across the vast diaspora. It is impossible to estimate the impact this specific instance of destruction may have, but it begs the question: how significant will *khachkars* be to future Armenians if there are few to observe? Furthermore, the denial of the existence of Armenian sites may serve to erase Armenian culture more than the physical destruction. As noted in the 2016 ECRI report, generations of Azeri children are being raised in a political community that is not only intolerant of Armenian culture, but rejects its presence altogether. As a result, Armenian culture may simply cease to exist to those having grown up without its presence in the form of architecture, inscriptions, or even cemeteries. In addition, it is not likely that Azerbaijan will stop destroying monuments after the elimination of Julfa Cemetery; their pattern of denial shows no remorse or recognition for what has occurred.

The destruction of Armenian monuments and the broader erasure of Armenian culture throughout Azerbaijan ultimately constitutes a form of violent culture loss called ethnocide. During the process of ethnocide, a dominant authority exerts its power over a people in order to eradicate their cultural identity. Azerbaijan, through not only the active destruction of cultural heritage sites but also the denial of the sites' very existence, is destroying evidence that ethnic Armenians have ever resided within their borders. In addition, ethnocide relies on a significant power imbalance between groups that allows one to emerge as the oppressor and the other as the oppressed. In this instance, Azerbaijan as a governmental authority ordering the destruction of heritage sites functions as the oppressor, as ethnic Armenians are greatly outnumbered in Azerbaijan's population and functionally without power in this dynamic.

Perhaps the reason the rationalization for ethnocide by Azerbaijan is so akin to that of the Ottomans during the Armenian Genocide is that both of these motivations function to carry out a form of

repressive culture change in order to strengthen or adjust one's perception of their national identity. The Azerbaijani government is forcing a repressive cultural change in order to establish a coherent national identity and heritage free from the presence of Armenians that have occupied the land previously. Indeed, John Tomlinson notes that national identity is an institution that results from "deliberate cultural construction and maintenance" (Tomlinson 2003). The destruction of Armenian culture allows the Azerbaijani government to construct in its place a national identity independent of a past littered with ethnic conflict between Azeris and Armenians. Furthermore, Ernest Renan said, "Forgetting history or even getting it wrong is one of the major elements in building a nation." If Azerbaijan truly is seeking to cultivate a nation with one identity and culture, it *must* forget the existence of Armenia.

The nature of the construction of a national identity requires consistent maintenance in order to continue functioning as a coherent, uniting force. Tomlinson argues that this occurs through the law, the education system, and the media (Tomlinson 2003). The ECRI report confirms that politicians, educational institutions, and media outlets routinely express brazen anti-Armenian sentiment, aligning with Tomlinson's description of institutions that maintain national identity (ECRI 2016).

Azerbaijan has clearly not only constructed, but planned to maintain a national identity formulated through the exclusion and eradication of Armenian culture. The need for national identity after being dominated by Soviet culture has motivated the Azerbaijani government to engage in a cleansing of Armenian culture via ethnocide. Azeri denial of Armenian heritage, persisting anti-Armenian sentiment, and the nature of national identity à la Tomlinson indicate the plausibility that the Azerbaijani government will continue to pursue ethnocide until its eventual goal is achieved: the total eradication of Armenian culture and heritage within Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

The cultural destruction of Armenian monuments and heritage sites function as a means to forget Armenia's existence within Azerbaijan, eliminate Armenian sense of belonging and heritage, and establish a cohesive national identity. Azerbaijan, as the governmental authority presiding over much of Armenia's cultural heritage, maintains power over the marginalized group of Armenians within Azeri borders through structural and de facto discrimination against Armenians. While the exact motivation may never be clear, it is evident that the actions taken to destroy Armenian culture and deny their identity act in tandem with a systemic power imbalance to perpetuate a case of ethnocide against Armenians both in Azerbaijan and otherwise. The denial of Armenian presence is concerning and indicates ambitions to continue the campaign of ethnocide. As a component of and often a precursor to genocide, it should be of alarm that Azerbaijan has been permitted to continue a campaign of cultural destruction with little consequence or reaction from Western governments or media. The oppressive actions by the Azerbaijani government are permitted to continue in part due to the lack of credible information and worldwide

concern for the cultural heritage of ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan. In the case of Julfa Cemetery, thousands of Armenian *khachkars* have been lost forever. Though the effects of this repressive culture loss are difficult to assess, one need only look to the destruction of cultural artifacts in the Armenian Genocide to see the role deculturalization plays in the broader goals of oppressive regimes. Though naming Azerbaijan as the sole aggressor in Armenian-Azeri conflict would be an oversimplification of an otherwise complex dispute, there is significant evidence to support the idea that Armenians living within Azeri borders are not only made to withstand a prejudicial society, but now also the march towards an Armenian-free Azerbaijan.

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