

The fate of sacred places in Nagorny Karabakh as a symbol of unsuccessful conflict transformation

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How to cite:

Horák S. & Hoch, T. (2023). The fate of sacred places in Nagorny Karabakh as a symbol of unsuccessful conflict transformation. *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series*, 59(59): 25-40. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.12775/bgss-2023-0002>

Abstract. The 2020 war in Nagorny Karabakh brought not merely a shift in the actual borders in the southern Caucasus; it also led to a change in control over several religious buildings or places that had become sacralized as symbols for one or the other side. Using selected examples of sacred places associated with Armenian or Azerbaijani historical memory, this article seeks to cast light on the fate of cultural monuments in war and its aftermath. In connection with the long-lasting conflict, these monuments are forced to undergo a cycle of sacralization, desacralization and reinterpretation of their origins and functions, depending on the approach taken by the winning side. Churches, monasteries and mosques in Nagorny Karabakh thus serve as sad examples of unsuccessful conflict transformation.

Article details:

Received: 06 July 2022
Revised: 11 October 2022
Accepted: 12 January 2023

Key words:

Nagorno Karabakh,
conflict transformation,
cultural studies,
religion,
monuments and historical memory,
schematic narrative templates

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1. Introduction

In the late 1980s, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR) within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic covered an area of 4,400 km², and had a population of approximately 200,000, of whom about three quarters were Armenians and one quarter Azerbaijanis. With the ethno-political mobilization of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis during the glasnost policy period, the region became a neuralgic point of relations between the two nations. The situation escalated in 1988 into an armed conflict that lasted for six years, resulted in the loss of more than 30,000 lives and forced more than a million Azerbaijanis and Armenians to leave their homes. The war also meant the expulsion of all Azerbaijani residents of Nagorny Karabakh and seven adjacent districts, which came under the Armenian administration of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR). To this day, this entity functions as a *de facto* state, with Armenia as its patron (e.g. Kopeček, 2020: 208–224). The territory administered by the NKR (including the seven liberated/occupied districts) was 11,458 km². The post-1994 period was marked by tensions along the line of contact, with periodic violence, yet the NKR held this border until autumn 2020, when the Second Karabakh War broke out. Following the implementation of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, the current territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (known in Armenian as “Artsakh”) covers an area of 3,170 km² and the implementation of the agreements is protected by Russian peacekeepers. This war was also very bloody and claimed more than 7,000 casualties in 44 days. The situation regarding the borders of Nagorny Karabakh is illustrated in Fig 1. For more detailed information related to the conflict in Nagorny Karabakh (see, e.g., de Waal, 2003; Broers, 2015; Gamaghelyan & Romyantsev, 2021).

Within the territory of today’s Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and in its close vicinity there are numerous sacred buildings – churches, monasteries and mosques – which not only possess a cultural and historical value but are also important on a symbolic level. During the past three decades, the borders of the NKR have shifted several times as a consequence of conflicts. After the first war (1988–1994), many cultural monuments associated with Islam remained within territory from which all the Muslim inhabitants had been expelled, and these monuments were damaged and desacralized as a consequence of the war. The Azerbaijani side repeatedly urged the Armenian

government and international organizations (such as Human Rights Watch, UNESCO or the Council of Europe) to ensure compliance with the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 UNESCO Convention. The purpose of these conventions is to protect not only sacred buildings, but cultural heritage in general. Because the Azerbaijani monuments sustained substantial damage during the war, the Azerbaijani government (as well as academics and representatives of Azerbaijani cultural organizations) accused Armenia of violating these international treaties and taking a barbaric approach towards cultural heritage (e.g. Imranly, 2007).

The Armenian side, however, cited the same conventions and accused Azerbaijanis of failing to take adequate care of Armenian cultural monuments located in areas under Azerbaijani administration (e.g. Karapetian, 2011). These protests intensified after the second Karabakh war in the autumn of 2020, when the NKR was forced to cede its southern part to Azerbaijan, including the historical capital of Shusha/Shushi, and to return all seven liberated/occupied districts. This war, too, brought extensive destruction of cultural heritage.

The events of 2020 thus not only led to a radical redrawing of the region’s political and security map; they also brought to the fore different interpretations of important cultural-historical sites in Nagorny Karabakh. The Azerbaijani army seized control of numerous areas that had originally been held by the government of the Armenian-populated NKR – and the winning side’s historiographic interpretations gained the upper hand. Now under the control of Azerbaijan, monuments considered part of the Azerbaijani cultural heritage are undergoing a process of resacralization (verbal or practical, or both). At best, Armenian cultural-historical sites are being desacralized, or their historical significance is being reinterpreted in accordance with Azerbaijani constructs. In cases when neither of these processes is possible (typically involving Armenian memorials to the Karabakh war or other modern monuments), the sites are being desecrated or destroyed entirely. Anthony Smith refers to this process as creating a negative reference framework (Smith, 2004: 155–157).

Antagonistic approaches to the perception of historical and contemporary events are far from unusual in conflict regions. Garagozov (2008) notes that characteristic features of conflict societies include simplistic and emotive interpretations of historical events, along with a reliance on myths and old grievances. These narratives are then reproduced by schematic narrative templates (Garagozov, 2008:

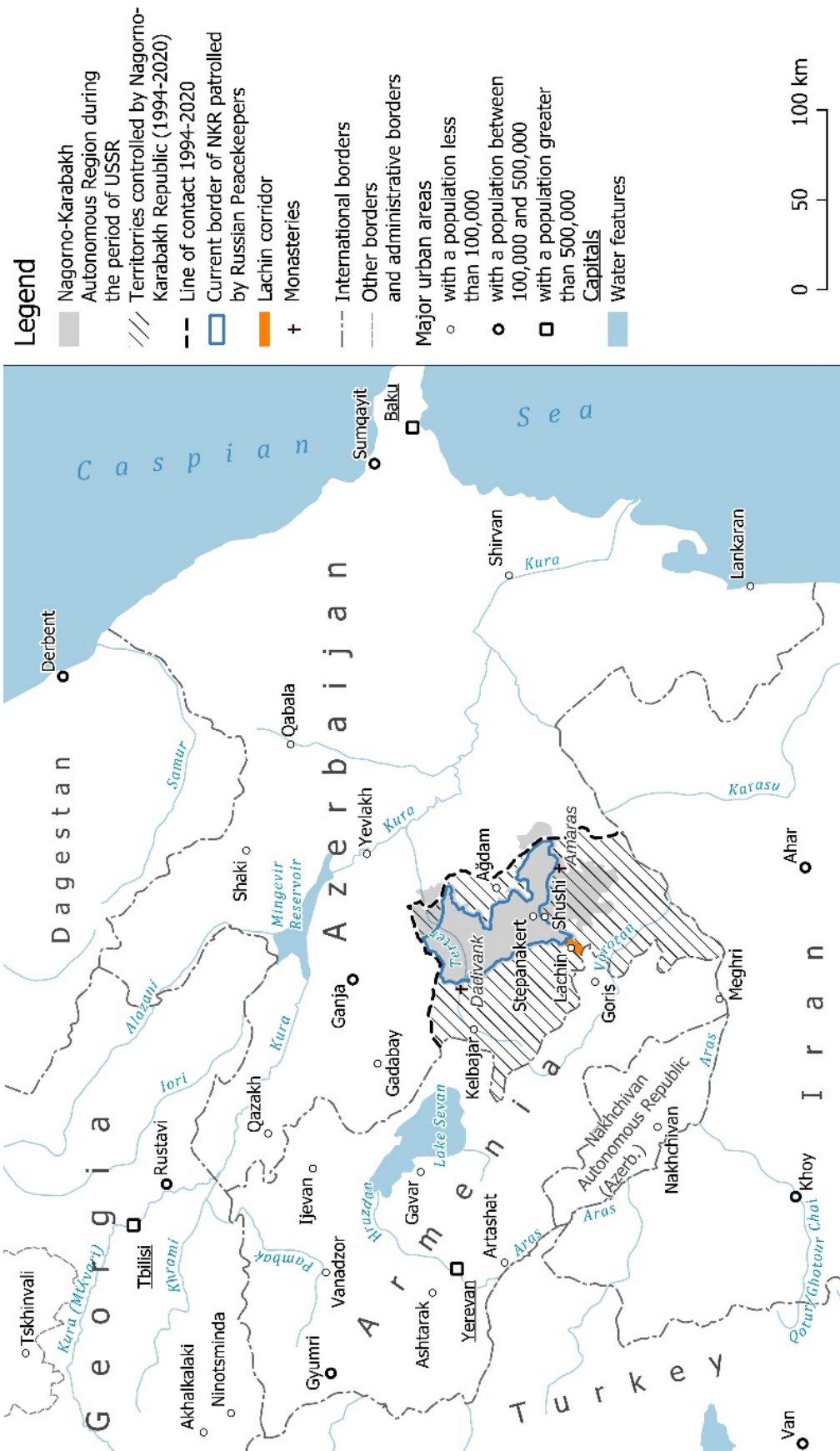


Fig. 1. Borders of Nagorno Karabakh since the dissolution of the USSR
Source: Authors

73–74). There is no doubt that Nagorny Karabakh – which in the past thirty years has been the scene of conflicts (with varying levels of intensity) between Armenians and Azerbaijanis – is an appropriate region for pointing out the existence of such schematic narrative templates and the creation of a negative reference framework. These constructs are manifested not only in the struggle for statehood and history, but also in the approach to symbols and the way in which cultural heritage is managed and cared for. It is thus unsurprising that Armenian and Azerbaijani interpretations and perceptions of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict are entirely different (e.g. Broers, 2015: 558–559). Authors specializing in peacebuilding and conflict transformation agree that, in order for war and its negative consequences to be transformed into positive peace, it is essential to transform the relations between the war-affected societies so that peace is supported by the large majority of the region's population and shared narratives predominate (e.g. Lederach, 1997: 94). However, this is not the case with the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorny Karabakh. By reproducing schematic narrative templates and reinforcing the negative reference framework, both sides refuse to recognize and maintain adequately the other side's cultural monuments.

We suggest that the application of these schematic narrative templates to Armenian and Azerbaijani attitudes towards the other side's historical monuments and other cultural artefacts involves two basic rules:

1. The formation of opposing narratives makes it very difficult if not impossible to achieve any positive progress in conflict transformation. The antagonism between these templates and their application in the region leads to a vicious circle of conflict narratives in both societies (see Fig. 2); it exacerbates the conflict situation, which in turn leads to the further reinforcement and entrenchment of the templates.
2. On a practical level, the application of schematic narrative templates enables the winning side to determine which historiographic framework becomes predominant, while the losing side (previously Azerbaijanis, now Armenians) attacks this framework. Cultural (and above all sacred) sites are thus powerful – and sad – symbols of this conflict of historiographies and wars of memory.

The aim of this article is to prove the hypothesis outlined above, by using the explanation of schematic narrative templates and historiographical

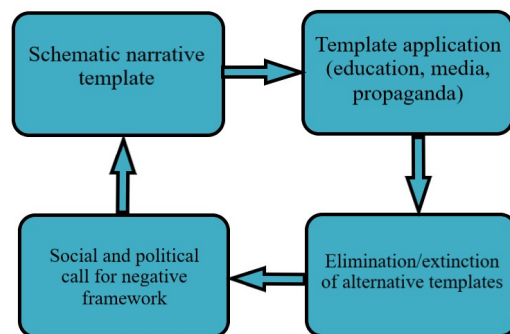


Fig. 2. Borders of Nagorny Karabakh since the dissolution of the USSR

Source: Authors

context for both sides. This is followed by the use of two specific cases showing the application of these templates in practice. These two cases include different perspectives. The first one demonstrates the geographic dimension using the example of the city of Shusha/Shushi, which has become the primary target of schematic narrative templates of conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijani historiography. Such a neuralgic point contributed to shaping strategic military goals in both the main conflicts (in the 1990s and in 2020). The second case focuses on the fates and interpretations of one side's religious sites when they fall within the territory held by the other side. Attention here will be directed towards the Armenian approach to mosques, primarily those that were under the control of the NKR in 1994–2020. On the opposite side is the Azerbaijani approach to churches, sacred places and monasteries that came under Azerbaijani control after the autumn 2020 war. These two cases will demonstrate the processes of sacralization, desacralization and reinterpretation of symbolic places and sacred sites in the context of juxtaposing historiographies.

2. The role of schematic narrative templates in conflict transformation

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a rapid growth of research investigating the connections between religion, space and symbols. For many years, the geography of religion has not focused primarily on the spatial distribution of individual religions throughout the world; instead, it has increasingly explored topics of religious pluralism, secularization and the sacralization and

desacralization of places associated with national memory and symbols (e.g. Kong, 2010; Knott, 2010; Tse, 2014). There is thus an intersection with nationalistically conceived historiographies, which in many cases have the potential to territorialize national memory (Smith, 1998; Shnirelman, 2001) – particularly in conflict regions, where history presented through a nationalist lens provokes powerful emotions. In a nation's collective memory, such narratives are reproduced in two basic ways: as specific narratives, which are associated with specific events in national history, and as schematic narrative templates, which involve general patterns rather than specific events and actors (Wertsch, 2002: 60–62; Wertsch, 2008: 122–124). Wertsch investigated Russian national myths, whereas Saparov (2022) more specifically focused on the case of Russian imperial toponyms in Nagorny Karabakh in the 19th century. Having studied archive material on the Nagorny Karabakh issue from the late 1980s, Garagozov (2008: 73–74) applied the concept to the collective memory of Armenians and demonstrated that characteristic features of these texts – which for the most part can be classified as types of victim narrative – include their oversimplified interpretation of historical events, their excessive emotionality, and also their reliance on myths and old grievances. In conflict societies, these templates are willingly adopted not only by politicians but also by academics and leading figures in community life. The problem is that this politics of memory not only mobilizes a society, but also homogenizes it, and the society then exists amid a dominance of narratives about age-old ethnic hatreds, grievances, fears and humiliations. This dominance is very persistent, because conflict transformation is hugely difficult in societies which firmly and homogeneously cling to such schematic narrative templates. According to the concept of conflict transformation, conflicts in today's world tend to undergo a process of slow transformation rather than being solved by finding a win-win strategy, and this process involves discourses, relationships, interests and expectations rather than the real causes of the conflict (Lederach, 1997; Miall, 2004). If conflict transformation is to work with discourses – especially with regard to the section of a society whose interests are incompatible with a sustainable peace – then it is necessary to discard the victim syndrome and the notion of historical injustices reproduced by leaders, historiography and the education system.

Snyder and Ballentine (2000: 61–62) state that sudden outbreaks of mass nationalism often occur in societies where freedom of speech and freedom of the press have only recently emerged.

This situation also applies to the final years of the existence of the Soviet Union, when not only the communist ideology but also censorship collapsed, and the individual nations began to assert their rights. The politics of glasnost can indisputably be considered one of the main triggers of ethno-political mobilization in Soviet Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as in Nagorny Karabakh itself (Hoch, 2020).

3. Historiography in the context of the Nagorny Karabakh war

It is generally accepted that the current conflict in Nagorny Karabakh dates back to the end of the 1980s, when the loosening of central control in the Soviet Union led to the emergence of nationalist sentiments among Armenians living in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region (NKAR), which was part of the Azerbaijan SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic). However, the roots of the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (formerly known as Muslims, Caucasian Turks or Tatars) reach back further than this and can be traced to pre-Soviet times. The current perception of Karabakh as a region symbolizing the ancient enmity between these neighboring nations is in reality more of a retrospective stereotype (with a history stretching back only around 130 years) than a genuine historical fact (Hoch, 2020: 314). Nevertheless, historians from both sides have a tendency to primordialistically trace the history of this rivalry back to ancient times, as well as reinforcing one side's claims to the region while denying the other side's claims. This process is so polarizing that, since the end of the 1980s, its only outcomes have been conflicts and ethnic cleansing – involving either forced population transfers (expulsions) or voluntary transfers (in the face of an advancing enemy). In the schematic narrative template, both sides have absolutized the importance of their ethnic group for the Nagorny Karabakh region. As Garagozov states (2008: 60–65), the Armenians lost Karabakh in the 18th century due to disputes among their leaders (*meliks*), which enabled the Turkic Panah Ali Khan to take control. Azerbaijani accounts of Karabakh's history heroize Panah Ali Khan, emphasizing the historical Turkic presence in the region and arguing that it lacked an Armenian population until the 19th century. In the first half of the 19th century, Karabakh came under Russian control, leading to emigration by the Turkic population and immigration by the Armenian

population; according to Azerbaijani historical accounts, this led to a negation of the Azerbaijani ethnicity and the Albanian (or in present-day discourse, Azerbaijani) Church (Baguirov, 2012: 144–146). In the second half of the 19th century, this process was accompanied by burgeoning religious and ethnic consciousness, which ultimately (in the first two decades of the 20th century) led to rivalry between the Turkic and Armenian communities in Karabakh. This rivalry was initially manifested on the economic and identity levels, but it gradually incorporated increasingly powerful nationalistic (Great Armenian / Pan-Turkic or Azerbaijani) elements (Souleimanov, 2013: 97–99). The first culmination of this confrontation came with a series of violent clashes between Armenians and Tatars in Shusha/Shushi in August 1905. In 1919–20, a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the mountain areas and foothills of Karabakh was followed by a pogrom against the Armenian population in Shusha/Shushi. Both these events left a powerful mark on the historiography and historical memory of both nations even after their Sovietization, though, according to Thomas de Waal, the two ethnic groups had co-existed relatively peacefully during the Soviet era, and the rivalry had been hidden beneath the Soviet ideology of “friendship among nations” (De Waal, 2003: 45–55).

Regardless of this rhetoric, Armenian intellectuals and politicians not only view Karabakh as the cradle of humanity (associated with the oldest human civilizations and the Biblical story of Noah); they also take a primordialistic view of the Armenian mountains (including Karabakh) as the historical homeland of the Armenian nation (Babajan, 2014). The sacredness of Armenian soil is emphasized in another schematic narrative template, according to which the Armenians were created by God, who gave them land, including Nagorny Karabakh (Tchilingirian, 1998). In Armenian narratives, this region plays a role comparable to that of Jerusalem for Jews or Mecca for Muslims (Armenpress, 2013). Armenians claim that Karabakh formed part of the Kingdom of Armenia at least from the 2nd century BCE, and that its population has thus been a continuous part of the Armenian cultural space for over two thousand years (Donabedian, 1994: 53). In other schematic narrative templates, Armenian mythology warns against a lack of unity among Armenians (represented up to the 18th century by local *meliks*), which has the potential to weaken the Armenians’ control over the region (Garagozov 2008: 62–64). This thesis, dating back to the end of the 19th century, has proved topical from the end of the 20th century up to the present day.

Azerbaijani historiography usually associates Karabakh with Azerbaijani culture and traditions. Not without the blessing and support of their political elites, in the 1960s Azerbaijani historians began to focus on expunging the Armenian element from the history of Karabakh (and the rest of Azerbaijan) and offering scholarly evidence and justification for the strongest possible presence of Azerbaijani elements in the region (Avalov, 1977; Ismail, 1995). Azerbaijani culture is considered by them to be the only autochthonous culture in Karabakh; this primordialization has been extended as far back as the Ancient times. According to this account of history, Karabakh was one of the main homelands of the so-called Caucasian Albanian religious and ethnic community – a group that Azerbaijani politicians and historians consider to be the predecessors of modern Azerbaijanis and a designation that in many cases has been used as a substitute for the word “Armenian”. One of the originators of the thesis based around the “de-Armenianization” of Azerbaijani history in the 1960s was the historian Ziya Masayevich Bunyatov. At the heart of his theory was the notion that the original inhabitants of the Caucasus – including Karabakh and a large part of Armenia – were Caucasian Albanians and not Armenians, who were said to have suppressed these original inhabitants (Bunyatov, 1965; Crombach, 2019: 82 ff.). According to this concept, the Caucasian Albanian culture eventually became extinct as a consequence of gradual assimilation with the Georgian, Armenian and Turkic population from the 10th century onwards – with the exception of small groups that retained their Albanian identity in the Caucasus (including in Karabakh) until the 19th century (Aliyeva, 1995: 149). The prevailing public discourse in Azerbaijan thus considers all Christian monuments in Nagorny Karabakh to be part of the Caucasian Albanian heritage. According to this interpretation, these monuments have no connection with Armenians or Armenia, and all the Armenian inscriptions on them (as well as records in Armenian historical literature) are deemed to have been falsified by Armenians during the 19th century (e.g. Huseynov, 2015). The presence of Armenians in Karabakh is explained by Azerbaijani historiographers as a consequence of the fact that, while some Albanians converted to Islam, others converted to Christianity and were Armenianized; Karabakh Armenians are thus not viewed as ethnic Armenians, but as Armenianized Albanians (Kocharli, 2004: 14).

This historiographic interpretation was fully accepted in the Azerbaijan SSR, and in independent

post-Soviet Azerbaijan it has become practically the only permissible line. This theory (originating with Bunyatov and further elaborated by his disciples) logically provoked vehement criticism not only from Armenian academics, but also among some Soviet (later Russian) and Western orientalists. The foundations were thus laid for the existence of mutually incompatible historiographic concepts, each of which rejected the validity of the cultural and architectural heritage of “the others”. In the era of perestroika and glasnost, the disputes among historians, religionists, ethnographers and art historians were harnessed by the political elites, and they contributed greatly to the escalation of the hostilities that eventually erupted into armed conflict.

The war in Nagorny Karabakh further entrenched the divisions between both sides, as the Armenians’ claims (based on the right to self-determination) were entirely incompatible with the Azerbaijanis’ uncompromising insistence on the region’s territorial integrity. The historiographic anti-discourse against “the others” became increasingly intense, and logically this discourse was most clearly manifested among those on the side that had most recently suffered defeat on the battlefield. As Gerard Toal and John O’Loughlin (2013) have noted, the victorious Armenian side was unwilling to accept any compromise in terms of territorial or other concessions, citing the sacred nature of Karabakh’s soil. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani concept, which originated among historiographers, became the official doctrine in Azerbaijan, propagated comprehensively and consistently not only by the country’s political and intellectual elites, but also in school textbooks and the media. A similar (though somewhat less coherent) discourse predominates in Armenian historiography, school textbooks and politics. Both sides thus lay claim to their own exceptionality, which is viewed in contrast with “the others” (Gamaghelyan & Romyantsev, 2013: 167). Any criticism of this dogma, even if supported by historical sources, is deemed to be propaganda emanating from “the others”, especially (though not exclusively) on the Azerbaijani side (Mahmudov, 2019; Mustafayev & Asadov, 2020; Shafiyev, 2021).

A logical consequence of this historiography was that cultural-historical monuments became the subject of military conflict – including places that are considered sacred in historiographies, historical memories and public discourses alike. It is therefore unsurprising that the armed conflict, stemming from an ideology based on opposing historiographic theses, has a direct impact on these architectural symbols.

4. Shusha/Shushi as a symbol of the conflict

Shusha (in Azerbaijani) or Shushi (in Armenian) was historically one of the most important cultural centers of the southern Caucasus. From the mid-18th century to the 1820s, it was the capital city of the Karabakh Khanate. As such, Shusha/Shushi became a key neuralgic point of conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijani historiographic concepts. Interpretations of historical sources, and also present-day political declarations, represent Shusha as a kind of idealized place where everything appears perfect (nature, climate, people, a wise and courageous ruler) and where people of “our” kind live (i.e. Turkic people, Azerbaijanis), as opposed to “the others” (i.e. Armenians or Iranians) (Ismailova, 2018: 111). Both competing historiographies used a range of metaphors to characterize the city – “the crown of Karabakh”, “the fortress of Karabakh”, “the Karabakh Jerusalem”, or “the heart of Karabakh (and Karabakh is the heart of Azerbaijan)” (BBC News, 2020; JAM News 2020; De Waal, 2003: 185). These metaphors emerged particularly during the armed phase of the conflict. Control of the city not only brought military and strategic advantages; it also served to symbolize victory or defeat for one or the other side.

The symbolism of Shusha/Shushi is particularly strong because, during the 19th century and most of the 20th century, it was home to both Armenian and Azerbaijani communities, so the city is imbued not only with historical memory, but also with historical anti-memory directed against the other element that lived there. The first inter-community conflicts and pogroms (in 1905 and 1920, respectively) etched into both national historiographies a range of stereotypes connected with the memory of this place, and both sides in the conflict exploited these stereotypes for their own ends. The place became sacred for both sides because it was where their ancestors had shed blood. Historiographers in both Soviet republics increasingly ignored the history and culture of the opposing ethnic group.

During the Soviet era, Armenian sources (including scholarly ones) thus complained about the Azerbaijanis’ one-sided interpretation of the city’s history and their one-sided approach to the restoration and maintenance of its historical monuments, which almost exclusively benefited the sites that were considered part of the Azerbaijani cultural heritage, while former Armenian sites (and entire city quarters) were abandoned to dereliction or subjected to reconstructions that were alien

to Armenian traditions (Mkrtchyan, 1989: 193). Paradoxically, the same publications almost entirely ignored the rich Islamic (i.e. Azerbaijani or Turkic) heritage of the city; any exceptions to this tendency were framed within the Armenian cultural context (Mkrtchyan, 1989: 187–188).

On the other hand, Azerbaijani historiography of the Soviet era celebrated the city as one of the nation's main cultural centers. This was partly because it had initially been settled by Azerbaijanis (known in historical sources as Tatars), and it had been founded by the Azerbaijani ruler Panah Ali Khan in conjunction with Albanian (i.e. Armenian) princes (*meliks*). Moreover, Shusha was considered the cradle of the traditional Azerbaijani musical genre *muğam*, so it was metaphorically dubbed “the Eastern Conservatory of Azerbaijan” or “the musical fortress” (Musayev, 2009: 65; Seferova, 2021).

The first Karabakh conflict (1988–1994) brought a complete disruption of the coexistence between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in the city; the first exodus (of Armenians) came at the end of the 1980s, followed by an exodus of Azerbaijanis in 1992. The new inhabitants – many of them Armenian refugees who had been driven from their homes in territory now under Azerbaijani control – were no longer associated with the historical memory of peaceful coexistence, and among refugees (particularly Azerbaijanis) this memory began to disappear under the pressure of news reports and state propaganda (De Waal, 2003: 45–55).

The seizure of the city by Armenian Karabakh units in 1992 created further stereotypes on both sides, including the heroization of the attacking (or defending) forces and the cult of fallen martyrs. Citing the latest archeological discoveries, Armenian historiography attempted to cast a degree of doubt on the accepted Azerbaijani thesis that the city had been founded in the 18th century, instead primordialistically situating its foundation back in the Hellenistic period (van Heese, 2018: 186). After 1992, life in the city could not return to its original multicultural basis. The Armenian side did not actually deny the historical presence of an Azerbaijani community there, but the Islamic and Azerbaijani monuments dating from the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras were left to fall into disrepair (see below). Gayane Novikova (2012) has noted that the Armenian side's victory in the first Karabakh war, in which it achieved its objectives, enabled it to display a certain degree of tolerance towards the Azerbaijani side (though this tolerance did not extend to a willingness to compromise, and in the case of Karabakh's mosques it took a long

while to manifest itself). Meanwhile, the defeated Azerbaijani side developed a revanchist – and thus more aggressive – form of rhetoric.

The city became the main target of the Azerbaijani army's military operations in 2020, and its seizure by Azerbaijan marked the end of the conflict's armed phase. The new round of conflict where both sides' view of “the others” is substantially radicalized, clearly reflects the deeply symbolic value and sacredness of the city.

It is no coincidence that most of the journeys undertaken by President Ilham Aliyev were to Shusha; these included propaganda visits by foreign guests and diplomats accredited in Azerbaijan. The new situation was analogous to the situation during the era of Armenian control (though reversed); for the Azerbaijani side, Shusha became not only a symbol of their military victory, but also a manifestation of the new order rejecting everything Armenian.

Formerly one of the five largest cities in the Caucasus (at the turn of the 20th century), Shusha/Shushi has now become a sparsely settled place of faded glory that is, at present, under Azerbaijani control. The interpretation of the city's history confirms the existence of schematic narrative templates and the negative reference framework of the winning side. Both sides sacralize the city's role in their own history, casting it as a center of Armenian/Azerbaijani culture. Because the city's history is linked both with Islam and with Armenian Christianity, it contains sites that are sacred symbols for each side; when the city is under one side's control, the sites of that ethnic group are prioritized, and maintenance or restoration work on the other group's sites is halted. The case of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral and Shusha mosques analyzed further in the text are bright examples of the approach. Both nations' interpretations of Shusha/Shushi are clearly symbolic of the incompatible and opposed rhetoric that prevails on both sides of the barricade. Unlike other historically multi-ethnic cities that have been the scene of ethnic conflicts (such as the Bosnian capital Sarajevo), changes in control of the city – both in the 1990s and in 2020 – have been followed by ethnic cleansing, in the form of both voluntary and forced exoduses by inhabitants belonging to the defeated group. There is thus no continuity of settlement, and the memory of the former coexistence of both communities (which lasted until the end of the Soviet era) has vanished. As a consequence, neither victorious side has ever considered attempting to achieve any real restoration of the city's historical multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity – including the use of sacred sites by the

other side. One side's control over the city thus leads to the desacralization and dereliction of the other side's sites and symbols.

5. Opposing myths about sacred buildings

In view of the historiographies on both sides, religious buildings logically became symbols of (mis)interpretations within the framework of the conflict. The practical utilization (or degradation) of these sites depended directly on who actually had control over the site. In Nagorny Karabakh, we can identify three types of sacred buildings that became symptomatic in the expression of schematic narrative templates and underwent alternating periods of sacralization and desacralization. The first type comprises the monuments belonging to the group that has control over the territory, the second comprises the other side's monuments, and the third is a mixed type, where the influence of external forces leads to a degree of compromise in the management and utilization of the sites.

One of the key neuralgic points in the city of Shusha/Shushi is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (in Armenian "Surb Ghazanchetsots", in Azerbaijani "Müqəddəs Xilaskar Kafedralı" or also "Qazançı Kilsəsi". The cathedral, completed in 1887, was built as a symbol of the cultural and economic wealth of the Armenian community (Harutyunyan, 2021). When the Armenian population was expelled in 1920, and the region fell under Soviet control (ushering in an era of anti-religious propaganda), the building was desacralized, becoming a "cultural monument" stripped of its former religious use; this was a very convenient situation for the Azerbaijani authorities. Moreover, the cathedral underwent reconstruction so that the spire on its main tower would not be substantially higher than its surroundings (which it had been when originally built). Azerbaijani historiography, which negated the Armenian presence in Karabakh, pointed out the fact that the first Christian structures in the city were not built until after the Russians had taken control of the region (Azvision.az, 2021).

In 1989, it once again became possible to use the cathedral for religious purposes, and the resacralization of the site was one of the most prominent ideological narratives of the first Karabakh war; it acted as a powerful motivating factor (besides purely military objectives) when the Karabakh army seized control of the city in May 1992. The buildings surrounding the cathedral, which had sustained damage during the first

Karabakh war, were demolished, and the cathedral was one of the first sites to be restored thanks to donations from the Armenian diaspora and other donors (De Waal, 2003: 184). The octagonal, pointed cupola was remodeled so that it more closely resembled its original appearance (though it was substantially taller than it appears in pre-1920 photographs). The cathedral became one of the foremost sacred symbols of the de facto independent state of Artsakh, and a focal point of Karabakh identity (Hakobyan & Mollica, 2021: 41). It was one of the destinations for the annual symbolic processions organized to mark the city's liberation (in May 1992), and it became a popular pilgrimage site.

Bombing during the second Karabakh war damaged the cathedral; this was condemned by Armenian society (including its political and cultural elites) as an act of vandalism (Pogosjan et al., 2020). In 2021, the Azerbaijanis began renovation work at the cathedral. According to current reports and materials, this project will involve a radical "de-Armenianization", to remove the "Armenian ahistorical accretions", in the words of the Azerbaijani side (Kucera, 2021; Apa TV, 2021). The official rhetoric is that the restoration work demonstrates Azerbaijan's ethnic and religious tolerance (Xalq Cəbhəsi, 2021; Baku TV, 2021). However, we can expect the cathedral to be desacralized, degraded into a mere tourist attraction, museum or cultural-historical site, while its religious significance is suppressed. Naturally, the Armenians have protested vehemently against these plans, constructing a negative framework based on the notion of Azerbaijani vandalism (Asbarez, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Armenia, 2021).

Old Armenian monasteries – Amaras in the south of Nagorny Karabakh or Dadivank in the north – have become another neuralgic point in the mutually incompatible discourses of Armenian and Azerbaijani historiography. The situation is exacerbated because unlike another place of symbolism for Christian Karabakh (the Gandzasar monastery), these two monasteries have since 2020 been outside the de facto control of the Artsakh government in Stepanakert, and they are formally administered by Russian peacekeeping forces.

Historiographic disputes over these places of religious symbolism date back to the Soviet era. Armenians complained that the monasteries were being neglected and abandoned to dereliction, as well as having been closed to religious ceremonies. Dadivank and Amaras are among the oldest and most important Christian (and thus also

Armenian) symbols in Nagorny Karabakh, and the loss of control over these sites has exacerbated the emotional problems associated with military defeat. By contrast, official Azerbaijani materials promote the monasteries of Karabakh (including Dadivank/Dadivəng or Xudavəng in Azerbaijani) within the context of the history and culture of Caucasian Albania; this notion is consistently and stereotypically replicated in all official mentions of these places (Ahundov, 1986: 226–228; Əlijev & Məmmədşadə, 1997). Indeed, the name “Dadi” itself is associated with Albanian history (Əl-Armutinin, 2021). Although both sides’ historiographies share the consensus that the monastery was founded by the wife of Prince Vachtang Arzu Xatun (in Armenian “Arzuchatun”), a supposition based on an inscription at the monastery (Mkrtchyan, 1989: 36; Əlizadə & Nəciyev, 2020: 2588), the history of the dynasty is interpreted in diametrically opposed ways. Azerbaijani historiography traditionally identifies it as an Albanian dynasty, whereas Armenian historiography links it with the Armenian Khachen principality (Miqayelyan, 2020). The monastery’s 19th-century history is similarly contested. Azerbaijani historians usually state that, until 1836, Dadivank was the last religious center of the Albanian Church, and that it was only abandoned after its dissolution by the Russian Orthodox Synod. It is claimed that the Armenians (who, according to this account, did not settle in Karabakh until the 19th century) later falsified the monastery’s history, including the Albanian inscriptions there (Əlijev & Məmmədşadə, 1997: 5–8). By contrast, Armenian sources on the monastery’s history reject the notion of its Albanian origins as a myth, pointing out the absence of any written documentary evidence of Albanian culture (which, in the Azerbaijanis’ accounts, was entirely erased by the “new” Armenian settlers). Armenian authors – not unironically – also point out that the most important allegedly Albanian sites had also suffered neglect by the authorities in the Azerbaijan SSR (Galichian, 2010: 49–51). The Armenian-supervised restoration of the monastery that began in 1994 (with international participation) was framed by Azerbaijanis as a destruction of Azerbaijan’s cultural and historical heritage and a manifestation of the ongoing “Armenianization” of the site. The relocation of movable items of cultural heritage to Armenia immediately before the region was ceded to Azerbaijani was evaluated by the Azerbaijani media and politicians as the most recent act of Armenian vandalism, an act that was said to be in blatant contravention of the 1970 UNESCO Convention (Zairova & Hacıyeva, 2020).

Currently, Dadivank monastery (like its counterpart in Amaras) is formally located within Azerbaijani territory (as defined in the November 2020 ceasefire agreement), yet it is under the protection of Russian peacekeepers. For this reason, it is still possible for two Armenian monks to remain in charge of the monastery, and Armenians from Nagorny Karabakh are (to a limited extent) permitted to travel to this symbolic location and organize religious services, pilgrimages, and ceremonies such as weddings (Baynazarov, 2021; Stremidlovskiy, 2021). The Azerbaijanis, in accordance with their own ideology, organize excursions from Azerbaijan to the monastery; these trips are heavily promoted in the media, and they are targeted at selected groups of people, chief among them members of the Udi community – a group considered to be the symbolic direct descendants of the Albanians in Azerbaijan (Ağaoğlu, 2021). A very fragile balance has thus been created between both sacral interpretations – the Armenian interpretation and that of the Udi/Albanians/Azerbaijanis. Dadivank is one of the few “islands” in the region where people from both sides of the conflict can meet, regardless of various (often artificially constructed) historiographical concepts and religious differences. Nevertheless, such meetings are no more than drops of conciliation in the ocean of hatred that has been created on both sides of the conflict – and, moreover, this fragile balance is only being preserved by ceasefire agreements and the presence of Russian peacekeepers.

Karabakh’s Islamic monuments have likewise been (and still remain) subject to opposing interpretations. On one side is the Armenian narrative, which gained the upper hand between 1994 and 2020. During this period, when the region’s Islamic sites were under Armenian control, two distinct approaches to these sites emerged. The first approach involved their complete destruction and even desecration. An example of this is the mosque in the former Azerbaijani town of Ağdam (in the Armenian toponymy, Akna), which – like the entire town – was destroyed and abandoned. The NKR authorities did not decide merely to leave the mosque and the city in ruins; when a new road was built to bypass the old town, it was symbolically left as a “ghost town”. Its existence was either ignored entirely, or it was described using metaphors such as “a nest of terrorists” and “the center of fascist Azerbaijani aggression”, or it was characterized as the former Armenian town of Akna, which had been occupied by Azerbaijan (BlogNews.am, 2012). The streets of the ruined town remained largely abandoned, and were only used, sporadically, for

grazing livestock; the mosque was one of the few buildings whose roof had remained intact, and it was a convenient source of shade for cows and other animals. This situation symbolically emphasized the desecration of this sacred site. Both prior to and after 2020, the Azerbaijanis have highlighted Ağdam's status as a symbol of the "unprecedented vandalism of the occupying forces targeted at the monuments to Azerbaijani culture and history" (Ağaməmmədov, 2021b). Thomas de Waal (2003: 6) described the town and its mosque as "a Caucasian Hiroshima". This metaphor became one of the foundations for the schematic narrative template employed in Azerbaijani discourse about the town (Ağaməmmədov, 2021a). The mosque in Ağdam, like the city of Shusha/Shushi, has thus become one of the most important sacred sites and symbols of Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war. This importance was symbolically underlined by the President İlham Aliyev, who attended the first prayer session held at the mosque following the town's liberation (President.az, 2020). Repair work at the mosque began in 2021, and it is set to become one of the most powerful symbols of Azerbaijan's renewed control over this part of Karabakh (alongside the city of Shusha), as well as one of the most striking images of Armenian atrocities perpetrated against Azerbaijani culture. When rebuilding Ağdam (similarly to other towns in southern Karabakh), the Azerbaijani government plans to preserve part of the town in ruins as a memento and as a negative visual image of the Armenians, in an echo of the Soviet authorities' preservation of ruined sites in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) as a memorial to the Red Army's struggle against the Nazis (Kamal, 2021).

The second approach taken by the Armenian authorities to Islamic monuments involved their desacralization and a shift in the historical narrative surrounding them. Up to 2020, this approach was practiced at four mosques out of the sixty that were originally located within Armenian-controlled territory (as documented by the Azerbaijanis). The most frequently discussed example was the only genuinely restored mosque, Yukhari Govhar Agha (in Azerbaijani, Yuxarı Gövhərağa), in Shusha/Shushi. The NKR government, supported by funding from Iran and a Kazakh businessman with close links to the former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, carried out a restoration project at this historical monument in 2017–19. Like many other monuments of this type, the mosque was referred to as "Persian"; according to some statements, the restoration was intended to serve as a symbol of mutual Iranian–Armenian solidarity

expressed in a tolerance for Armenian monuments in Iran and vice versa (Voskanyan 2019). The mosque was converted into the Armenian–Iranian Cultural Centre, a museum avoiding all references to its Azerbaijani past and eschewing any acknowledgement of its original religious function – as the former Muslim community no longer existed in the city (Kucera, 2019). The renovation of the mosque in the form of a cultural monument and museum provoked a negative response among Azerbaijanis, who generally condemned the "Iranianization" of the site (e.g. AIR Center Report, 2021). Some authors even expressed suspicion of the Armenians' intentions, asking questions such as "Since when have the Armenians honoured the riches of Islam?" (Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdarəsi, 2019; RealTV.az, 2020).

The situation of other symbols of Karabakh's Islamic and Turkic past whose maintenance was neglected under Armenian rule and that were partly left to fall into ruin (especially in Shusha/Shushi – mosques, palaces, an Azerbaijani quarter with typical houses) provided an easy opportunity for Azerbaijani historians and politicians to accuse the Armenians of vandalism and the violation of conventions on cultural heritage protection (Mamedli, 2020; Kaspi.az, 2021; Vestnik Kavkaza, 2021). Islamic monuments thus again served to create a negative framework enabling Azerbaijan to point to the destruction of numerous monuments (both sacred and secular) with symbolic importance for Azerbaijani culture and history.

The examples of sacred buildings outlined above, and their ways in which these structures were utilized and managed, thus reveal the two main consequences of schematic narrative templates:

1. The historiography of the winning side prevails, and the victors decide whether and how individual monuments will be renovated and/or utilized.
2. There remains a deep-rooted mutual sense of distrust and isolation, even with regard to acts that ostensibly demonstrate goodwill, such as the renovation of monuments belonging to the other side.

In consequence, any step taken by one side (whether positive or negative) leads to the confirmation and reinforcement of existing schematic narrative templates. Both approaches thus lead to a further entrenchment of the conflict. The exclusion of the defeated side from the use of historical monuments and the unwillingness to accept the defeated side's interpretations, combined

with the one-sided propagation of the winning side's interpretations, mean that mutually incompatible schematic narrative templates cannot be overcome. The emphasis on historical atrocities committed by the other side, and the failure to acknowledge or prevent new incidents of cultural vandalism on both sides of the conflict, further entrench the negative reference framework in both societies – thus exacerbating mutual hostilities.

6. Conclusion

A long-term process of historiographic primordialization emerged during the Soviet era, as well as the gradual deconstruction and abandonment of the official Soviet “friendship among nations” ideology. These processes paved the way for the emergence of mutually incompatible schematic narrative templates and negative reference frameworks leading to conflict and hostilities between the Armenian and Azerbaijani communities. These processes have progressively been entrenched as the generations who experienced life in the USSR grow older and pass away. Continuing propaganda and “acts of vandalism” on both sides have stimulated an increasingly militaristic form of rhetoric in both societies, and the continuous construction and reinforcement of their own image of the enemy. From this context, it is thus evident that a one-sided view of the region's cultural-historical symbols (and the specific details of how they should be utilized and managed) will continue to prevail (Vendik, 2020). The cultural and religious symbols of the “others” have been and will continue to be neglected, desacralized and desecrated, and adapted to fit the narrative of the side that currently controls them, while the other side will continue to reject this interpretation outright.

The mutually incompatible Armenian and Azerbaijani historiographies, including their interpretations of sacred places in Karabakh, currently occupy positions that preclude any realistic possibility of bridging the gap between the two approaches. Any historians (or other groups in society) who would potentially be willing to make such concessions tend to be silenced by the official narrative and the majority of society, which corresponds to the vicious circle of conflict narratives described in Fig. 2 in the introduction of this article.

There are also no external forces that could eventually build (in the absence of goodwill on both sides) bridges spanning the increasingly deep chasms

between competing historiographic accounts. The case of Dadivank/Xudavəng mentioned in the text is rather the exception to the rule that cannot significantly change the general approaches from both juxtaposed sides.

As a result, we can also expect a further degradation of Armenian religious sites on the territories that were transferred to Azerbaijan after November 2020. They will either be destroyed, left to fall into ruin or (in the case of the most important sacred places) adapted to fit the victorious Azerbaijani narrative.

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