

Armenians in the 2020 Second Nagorno Karabakh War Resistance against ‘evil’: symbols, narratives, and practices

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Abstract

The term ՄեծԵղեղն [Great Evil Crime] is used in Armenian to refer to the Armenian Genocide. The term comes from the Bible. This demonstrates that the commemoration first took place in religiously defined spaces, and later took on a civic character. However, the Armenian Apostolic Church preserved its role by promoting the Armenian Martyrs’ Day Commemoration. On the 100th anniversary of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the victims were canonized by the Armenian Apostolic Church. This made the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide the first saints canonized by the Armenian Church since Saint Grigor Tatevatsi’s canonization in the XV century. After the 100th anniversary, the Armenian Church’s feast day for the commemoration of the martyrs of the Genocide started being celebrated on April 24. The name of this commemoration was later shortened to ‘April 24’.

When in 1988, Nagorno Karabakh Armenians demanded to join the Republic of Armenia they met anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azeri cities of Sumgait, Kirovabad [Ganja] and Baku. However, what started as an administrative-territorial problem soon acquired an ethnic dimension reactivating memories linked to the Genocide. In Armenian national consciousness, the Sumgait pogrom was linked to the events of 1915. This was confirmed when, on Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day (24.04.1988), a *khachkar* to the pogrom’s victims was erected at the Genocide Memorial site of Tsitsernakaberd (Armenia).

This paper suggests that it is the memory of the Armenian Genocide that can help explain Armenians’ behavior in the Nagorno Karabakh Wars. First, practices of violence were constructed on a memory of the Genocide-Resistance narrative. This was symbolically reproduced in the conflict. The memory of the *fedayeen* was activated when the *fedayeen*, the defenders of the Armenians, were popularized in rallies via songs, slogans, and photos after the Sumgait pogroms. The term *fedayeen* comes from the Arabic which means ‘those who sacrifice’ and originally referred to guerrilla Hayduk-type volunteers who fought against the Ottomans (1880-1920). Thus, when later ethnic-Armenian volunteers formed paramilitary units, self-describing themselves as *fedayeen*, they inherited the name of the fighters who opposed Ottoman massacres (Iskandaryan, Mikaelyan and Minasyan 2016, 99-100). Second, a major symbol displayed during the conflicts was the cross. Armenian soldiers wore crosses on their uniforms and vehicles. The cross was more than a manifestation of religious affiliation but materialized in churches and monasteries as a symbol of belonging and identity. This was confirmed when crosses became objects of cultural cleansing during the war, and the representation of the ritualized killing and destruction by ‘evil’ forces. Third, ‘evil’ acquired a political dimension based on the memory of the Genocide, embodied in the faces of Azerbaijani and Turkish militants. Thus, when the Turkish Army got directly involved in the 2020 Second Nagorno Karabakh War, ‘evil’ reproduced itself in political practices. These were already related to the Genocide because they glorified Ottoman Genocide-related icons while also targeting religious symbols, i.e., when Shushi Armenian churches were first bombed and then hosted Turkish flags. Concurrently, Armenians developed their own countermeasures to fight ‘evil’ forces, i.e., ‘white crosses’ and emergency-style rituals.

Keywords: Nagorno Karabakh war, Great Evil Crime, genocide, cross, violence

Mis-en-scene: actualizing genocidal practices¹

The direct involvement of the Republic of Turkey in the 2020 Second Karabakh War created political and cultural narratives that related to the memory of the 1915 Armenian Genocide² in both the Republic of Armenia and Armenian Diasporic settings.

The war started on September 27, 2020 and lasted 44 days. Beside Turkey, the Azerbaijani Army were supported by Turkmen militia, and Salafi and Jihadi mercenaries from Northern Syria. The incumbent Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, in his address to the Nation, on October 3, 2022, said:

“For almost a week now, the Armenian nation in Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] and in [the Republic of] Armenia has been resisting the terrorist offensive unleashed by Azerbaijan and Turkey. They are not here to deal with Karabakh or the Karabakh issue [...] Their key target is the Armenian nation. Their objective is to carry on with their genocidal policy. And they have set themselves the task of bringing to completion the Armenian Genocide. But I wish to state now that the Armenians, the citizen of the Republic of Armenia, the citizen of the Republic of Artsakh is not an eternal traveler on the road to Der Zor [Deir ez-Zor, town on the Syrian desert where thousands of Armenians lost their lives during the Genocide]”.

A week later, taking to TV5Monde, he went on saying,

“[...] a hundred years later, Turkey returned to South Caucasus to complete the policy of genocide against the Armenian people”. (Pashinyan 8.10.2020)

On October 18, it was the Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, to release an interview to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*:

“It is difficult to describe anything other than *genocide* [our italics] as the actions unleashed by Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh these days with the open support of Turkey and its mercenaries. The obvious goal is to evict the Armenians from Artsakh at all costs, to eliminate all the evidence of the Armenian presence, which happened to our people a hundred years ago in Ottoman Turkey. The manuscript is the same. What if not genocide, the bombing and shelling of civilians, the subsequent

¹ Despite the difficulty of dividing the paper into precise areas of responsibility, Hakobyan concentrated mainly on Sections 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9; Mollica on Sections 1, 2, 3, 4 and 10.

² The term was used for the first time by the Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944; it was meant to describe Nazi politics of systematic murder, violence, and atrocities against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as “a seminal example of genocide” (Aron 2003, 9).

destruction of peaceful settlements, the targeting of churches and cultural monuments in disregard of all international obligations in this regard?”. (Del Re 18.10.2020)

Concurrently, what was going on in Nagorno Karabakh acquired a different meaning in Turkey. The involvement of Turkey in the war created new forms of political practices that linked up to what for Armenia was a reproduction of old denialist narratives associated to the Genocide, that is, glorifying Genocide-related prominent icons, i.e., Enver Pasha³ or his Caucasus Islamic Army⁴. Thus, denialism became part and parcel of both Azerbaijani and Turkish ideology in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021, 36-54).

Evil and Martyrs: Background to the First Nagorno Karabakh War

The term *Մեծ Եղեռն* [*Meds Yeghern*, Great Evil Crime or Great Crime] is used in Armenian to refer to the Armenian Genocide. According to the New Dictionary of the Classical Armenian language, the term *Yeghern* comes from an Armenian translation of the Bible (2 Macc, IV: 50; Am, III: 10). It means Evil, Crime, Calamity and has long been used in Armenian Medieval literature (Awetik'e an, Siwrmēlean, Awgorean 1836, 654; Meytikhanyan 2009, 144-147; Matioossian 2021). The Bible was translated in Armenian immediately after the invention of the Armenian Alphabet in 405-406 by the monk Mesrop Mashtots (367-440), an Armenian linguist, composer, theologian, and hymnologist venerated as a saint by all Armenian Churches (Encyclopedia Britannica 2022). Thus, at least at the beginning, the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide followed religious practices and dwelled in religiously-defined spaces.

The Armenian historian Vartan Matioossian explained the origin of the term *Yeghern* in the following terms:

“The organized annihilation [of the Armenian population] of 1915 was an unprecedented eruption of pure evil that encompassed not only the wholesale killing of people, but also the devastation of their culture and civilization, the dispossession of their property and ancestral territory, and the dehumanization and traumatization of the survivors and their descendants. That evil component ensured the use of Medz

³ Ottoman Minister of War during the First World War, he was sentenced to death *in absentia* for the planning and execution of the Armenian Genocide. He died in 1922, fighting against the Bolsheviks in Central Asia, killed by the Armenian Red Commander, Hakob Melkumov (Sunny 2015, 336 and 346).

⁴ Military unit created on July 10, 1918 by Enver Pasha to establish control in Eastern Transcaucasia (previously Russian Empire's Baku and Elizavtepol provinces) and unit all Turkic nations under the banner of Islam. Its actions against Armenians are today considered part of the Armenian Genocide (Dadrian 1995, 347-355).

Yeghern [...] for a crime of such catastrophic and unprecedented proportions. (Matiossian 15.05.2013)

The legitimacy of the use of the word *Yeghern* to describe what had happened to the Armenian community has never been questioned. Rather, at times, it was not deemed enough to describe the dimension of the event (Matiossian 15.05.2013).

The victims were called ‘martyrs’ from the first Genocide commemorations in 1918-19. Commemorative practices took first place in what are contemporary Syria and Iraq, mostly in Damascus, Aleppo and Baghdad which were Ottoman-controlled cities that, during the Genocide years, were locations of mass killings, concentration camps and death marches (Marutyan 2018a; Mollica and Hakobyan 2021). The main commemorative sites were originally Armenian cemeteries and Armenian Apostolic Church centers; at the same time, Catholic and Evangelical Armenian Churches also started holding commemorations, i.e., in Aleppo and Constantinople [Istanbul] (1918-1919). This proves that since the Armenian conversion to Christianity in 301, the religious dimension was central to the self-definition of the Armenian nation and the Church a potent force in shaping national and political culture (Tololyan 1987a, 90).

The first public Genocide-related commemoration of April 24 took place in 1919, in Constantinople. It was dedicated to Armenian intellectual and public figures victims of the Genocide and was termed “Ceremonial Mourning of April 11” (Marutyan 2018a, 105-106). The ceremony was held in the old Armenian Apostolic Church of the Holy Trinity in Pera [Beyoğlu] in Galatasaray district, where the then Patriarch of Constantinople Zaven I Der Yeghiayan and Bishop Mesrob Nuroian said Mass. Then the civic Ceremony (of Remembrance) with speeches, spiritual music and poetry readings continued in the Armenian Evangelical Church Holy Trinity in nearby Çeşme street. The following year, the Armenian Apostolic Church proclaimed ‘April 24’ the official day to commemorate the Armenian Genocide as National Remembrance Day and Day of Mourning and Commemoration worldwide. It was also included in the Armenian religious calendar (Ashegian 2004, 132-138; Marutyan 2018a, 113-115). Thus, churches and church spaces became *loci* of remembrance, main centers for all Genocide commemorative rituals and practices. The memory of the Armenian ‘martyrs’ materialized in Armenian churches.

However, it was in the eastern Syrian settlement of Deir ez-Zor that the above was magnified; making the city the main contemporary Diasporic Armenian space of remembrance (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021, 135-164). Deir ez-Zor and its Armenian Genocide survivors structured the relationship between memory and space. The Armenian Apostolic Church was built in al-Rashtie district between 1928 and 1931 as a memorial space above the human remains of the victims of the Genocide, above the bones of their ‘martyrs’. This followed an early Medieval Christian tradition of sanctuaries constructed upon martyrs’ graves, known also in Armenian Christian tradition (Hasratyan, 2002, 696; Örmanean 1979, 157-158). It is a martyrological

tradition that has become the main axis of Church narratives and practices, particularly in Armenian Diasporic settings in the Middle East (Tololyan 1987a, 93).

On April 24, 1965, in what was then Soviet Armenia, the Catholicos of all the Armenians Vazgen I, held a *requiem* in the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, the spiritual center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, on the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. The event was called ‘On the fiftieth anniversary of the collective martyrdom of Armenian people’; then, in the northern wing of the Cathedral, he blessed the foundation of the Memorial of Martyrs (Marutyan, 2018b, 112). On October 31, an Armenian Genocide Memorial made of a group of *khachkar* [traditional Armenian cross-stones] was opened in the yard of Cathedral. It was the first Genocide Memorial build in Soviet Armenia. On the monument, it was written:

“Cross Stone of Prayer and Covenant, In Memory of Armenian Martyrs of 1915 April Yeghern”. (Marutyan 2018b, 112)

On the opposite side of the monument, the names of Armenian resistance sites (between them: Van, Musa Ler, Marash, Edesia, Zeytun, Sasun, Sardarapat) during the Genocide were written; on November 18, some remains of the victims of the Genocide brought from Deir-ez-Zor were placed under *khachkars*. (Marutyan 2018b, 112)

The *khachkar* is a symbol that combined a cross with floral elements. It means the life-giving power of the cross, the power of life over death as a symbol of salvation. It was believed that it would cure diseases and protect from evil (Petrosyan 2008). Indeed, most early *khachkars* were erected for the salvation of the soul of both living and dead people and as a form of protection from natural disasters. In the 1960’s, following the awakening of Armenian national cultural heritage, the art of carving *khachkars* witnessed a rebirth to the extent that it surged to symbolize contemporary Armenian culture (Petrosyan 2008, 373-375). On the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, when there were mass demonstrations in Yerevan and in Armenian Diasporic settings, it was the willingness to remember the victims of the Genocide that became the dominant motif of the national awakening. Thus, hundreds of *khachkar* were built worldwide, many incorporating memorials to commemorate the victims of the Genocide. Since 2010, the *khachkars*, their symbolism and craftsmanship have been inscribed in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Unesco 2010).

On April 23, 2015, a ceremony was held at the Mother See of Etchmiadzin to canonize the victims of the Armenian Genocide. It was the first canonization done by the Armenian Apostolic Church in the last 400 years (the last saint the Church had proclaimed was St. Grigor Tatevatsi, in the XV century). The ceremony ended at 19:15 local time, symbolizing the year ‘1915’ which witnessed the start of mass killings and the deportations of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the

ceremony, a minute of silence was announced and 100 bell-shots were sounded in Armenian and non-Armenian churches worldwide (including Notre-Dame de Paris and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow).

Catholicos Karekin II remarked:

“The blood of the Armenians martyred for Christ has placed the seal of unshakeable faith and patriotism on the sands of the desert [...] The canonization of the martyrs of the Genocide brings life-giving new breath, grace and blessing to our national and ecclesiastical life”. (News.am 23.04.2015)

Aram I, Armenian Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, said:

“Our martyrs, who, empowered by the Holy Spirit overcame the ‘war against evil’, empower us with renewed faith to face boldly the new evils of new times”. (Civilnet.am. 24.04.2015)

The Armenian Catholic Church started being involved in Genocide-related remembrance practices in 1918. On 8 December, 1918 a Mourning Ceremony dedicated to Armenian *martyrs* took place in the Armenian Catholic Church of St. John Chrysostom [today in Taksim square] in Istanbul with the participation of the Catholicos Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church Paul Petros XIII Terzian (Sanjian 2022).

In 2001, Pope John Paul II beatified Ignatius Shoukrallah Maloyan, Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Mardin (1911-1915), killed during the Genocide (John Paul II 07.09.2001). Today April 24 is included in the Armenian Catholic Church religious calendar under the title “In Memory of the Thousand Martyrs of Armenian nations”.

The First Nagorno Karabakh War: Evil against crosses and *khachkars*

From the 27th to the 29th of February 1988, Armenian pogroms took place in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait. They followed the decision taken the week before by the Nagorno Karabakh Parliament to leave the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic [SSR] to join the Armenian SSR. It was the first eruption of violence in the conflict. Sumgait became the symbol of ethnic violence in the Soviet Era.

What started as an administrative-territorial problem, soon took on an ethnic dimension, reactivating the memories linked to the Armenian Genocide. In the Armenian national consciousness, Sumgait pogrom was immediately linked to the Genocide of 1915 (Abrahamian 1996/1997; De Wall 2003; Marutyan 2009). On the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day (April 24, 1988), a *khachkar* dedicated to the

pogrom victims was erected in the Armenian Genocide memorial site in Tsitsernakaberd (Armenia).

At times during the pogroms in Sumgait, the cross was used to mark raped and tortured victims (Abrahamian 1996/97, 273). Cross marks were later engraved on most of the bodies of the victims of the April 1992 massacres, when Azerbaijani units attacked the Nagorno Karabakh Armenian village of Maraga (Grigoryan 10.04.2020). Baroness Caroline Cox of Queensbury, a human rights activist in the House of Lords (United Kingdom), who visited the village immediately after the massacre on April 10, (the village was retaken by Armenian units the following day), wrote:

“This was truly like a contemporary Golgotha many times over”. (Cox 1998)

In the 1990s, sacred spaces became *loci* of collective and ritual killings. Archbishop of Artsakh, Pargev Martirosian, recalled:

“Even in our Holy Savior Church in Gyulistan, when some of our people from [the region of] Shahumyan did not manage to escape, they [Azerbaijanis] beheaded 7 people, threw them on the altar and blew up the dome”. (Ilurer.am. 09.10.2020)

Ritual killings also took place in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War, including the beheading of Armenian civilians. One example is 69-year-old Genadi Petrosyan, from Madatashen. His severed head was placed on a dead pig (Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 67-72) when he refused to leave his home when Azeri forces captured his village (Nazaretyan, 20.12.2020). A more extensive Azerbaijani practice was to cut off the ears of dead Armenian servicemen and civilians. The ritual referred to an allegedly similar practice performed by a Turkish serviceman who was said to have cut off the ear of one of the Armenian commanders who stood up against the Ottomans at the beginning of the XX century (Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 150-151). In Azerbaijani mythology the story concerned Andranik Ozanian (1865-1927), an Armenian military commander leader of a *fedayeen* group (Vratnesyan 29.05.2009). Concurrently, for the Armenians, he was a hero, symbol of resistance against Armenian massacres, a Major General of the Russian Army during the First World War.

From an Armenian viewpoint, the above showed that the old Ottoman genocidal violence ideology was re-used to justify Azerbaijani violence and its dehumanizing actions against ethnic Armenians both in terms of narration of violence and in terms of violent practices. In turn, crosses and cross-stones could be intentionally targeted during both Nagorno Karabakh conflicts, even if they were not in conflict zones. A case in point was the systematic destruction of the Armenian Medieval Cemetery cross-stones in Julfa (Nakhichevan enclave, Azerbaijan), between 1997 and 2006 (AD HOC Report, 2022; Pickman 2006).

Even though the Nagorno Karabakh conflict cannot be defined a religious conflict, religious symbols, and narratives as markers of identity and belonging were widely used and consequently targeted. The region has an impressive religious history with vibrant religious institutions, hundreds of churches, monasteries, and church schools (Tchilingirian1998, 1-3). As Tchilingirian (2003, 151) put it:

“Karabakh Armenians believe that their land is sacred, consecrated by hundreds of churches, monasteries and ‘holy places’ and by the ‘blood of the martyrs,’ who were killed in the recent war (1991-94) and throughout the centuries in defense of Karabakh”. (Tchilingirian 2003, 151)

Pergev Martirosian (Then Bishop [today Archbishop] of Artsak), interviewed by Tchilingirianin (1994) explained the situation during the First Nagorno Karabakh (1989-1992) in the following terms:

“[The Azerbaijanis] are forcing us to go to war. They are forcing us to use our weapons. Their desire is to destroy Karabakh by force, to occupy our land by force. That is *evil* [our italics]. This is the work of the evil one. This is very clear. When you are unable to stop the evil through prayer and by words, and he is coming to devour your body, by raping and perpetrating immoral acts to your sister and mother, to your daughter and children, it is your duty to protect and safeguard their lives. When you are defending [the innocent], it does not mean that you are killing [your enemy] and doing evil. That is your moral obligation. Secondly, when there is evil, evil must be uprooted. Morally, we are obligated to do this, all of us”. (Tchilingirian 1994, 6)

Armenian victims of the First Karabakh War were considered martyrs and linked to martyrological traditions associated with Saint Vardanand and his comrades who died in the Battle of Avarayr fighting against the Persian Army in 451 (Tchilingirian, 2003, 137-139). This meant that according to Armenian symbolic religious language, the Armenian soldiers’ “death is considered a sacrifice for the welfare and ‘regeneration’ of the [Armenian] people” (Tchilingirian 2003, 168). The struggle was thus perceived as Avarayr in all Armenian Diasporic communities (Panossian 2006, 48-49).

Nevertheless, in the conflict, as pointed out by Tchiligrain (2003, 170):

“An important difference between the Armenian and Azerbaijani religious discourse is that the former is not directed towards the Azerbaijani people, but against a regime and a nationalism that calls for the *expulsion of Armenians from Karabakh*”.

However, during the First Nagorno Karabakh War, the Armenian religious discourse was ‘introspective.’ There was an awareness of ‘the evil’ both within and

without, and the notion that, without extricating the evil found within, the evil which was without could not be overcome. In other words, disloyalty to God would bring God's wrath upon the Armenian nation. The main components of such a religious discourse were the eradication of evil and the protection of the land that 'God gave' to Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh. Based on such a doctrine, it was hoped that ultimately

"Karabakh will become a unique (sic!) country, where people will live piously and according to high moral standards". (Pargev Martirosian quoted by Tchilingirian 2003,170-171)

The Second Nagorno Karabakh War: Evil against religious festivities and sites

When the Second Karabakh War started on Sunday, September 27, 2020, it was a religious feast day for the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Church celebrated the Holy Cross of Varaga [Varaka Khach], which is one of the four festivities dedicated to the Holy Cross. According to Church tradition, on the nearest Sunday to September 28 (that is, two weeks after the festivity of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross), the Armenian Church commemorates the III century placement of an authentic relic of the Cross in Armenian soil at Varagavank (Van region, today in Turkey). Climbing Varag Mountain, on Lake Van, while fleeing Byzantine persecutions, Saint Hripsime [Arsema] and her maidens carried with them a piece of the Holy Cross. Later, in 653, some fragments of the cross were found by the Armenian hermit Todik. To commemorate the discovery, Catholicos Nerses III the Builder (641-661) proclaimed the nearest Sunday to September 20 as the Feast of the Holy Cross of Varag and founded the Sourb Nshan [Holy Sign] Church there. In the X century a monastery was built. In the Middle Ages, pieces of the Holy Cross were transferred to other Armenian churches and monasteries. In 1655, some were moved to St. Mary Church of Van (later renamed Holy Sign Church) where they had remained until 1915 (Ghazaryan 2002, 430) when they were moved to the Holy See of Etchmiadzin. During the Armenian Genocide, the Monastery of Varag was burned by the Ottomans; two monks and four of their attendants were killed (Kevorkian 2011, 325-326). Despite part of the structure survived the destruction, sharing the fate of other Armenian religious structures that survived the 1915 events, the Monastery was later destroyed in the 1960s and its remains used as a barn (Sarafian 22.01.2012; White, 2014, 157). Thus, the day of 'September 27' had strong interconnected symbolic markers, while the Holy Cross meant space and memory. The Monastery of Varag, named after the relics of the Holy Cross, was close to Van in historic Armenia and Varag Mountain was on the southern shore of Lake Van.

On October 18, 2020, Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan, Prelate of the Armenian Diocese of Tavush, while visiting the Cathedral of Shushi, historical capital, and cultural center of Nagorno Karabakh, after being bombed by the Azerbaijani Army, said:

“This war took place on the feast of the Holy Cross of Varag [...] The Cross, Christianity is the target of Azerbaijan and Turkey to try to quickly weaken and weaken our nation, that is the logic of the enemy’s attacks”. (Baghdasaryan 18.10.2020)

Father Smbat Sargsyan, pastor of St. Holy Mother of God and St. Hovhannes Churches in the village of Arinj (Kotayk Diocese, Armenia) observed that it was not a coincidence that the Azerbaijani provocative attack took place on the day the Armenian Church celebrates the Holy Cross of Varaga. He pointed out that,

“This is once again a sign that this struggle is a righteous struggle for existence led by God”. (Pastinfo 30.09.2020)

- **Islamic rituals at the Church of Zoravar**

In the southern Nagorno Karabakh settlement of Jebrail/Mekhakavan, controlled by the Nagorno Karabakh Defense Army since the end of the First Nagorno Karabakh War, the church of Zoravor, St. Astvatsatsin [Holy Mother of God] was destroyed in March 2021, seven months after the end of the Second Karabakh War. The settlement had passed under Azerbaijani control on October 9, 2020.

The church was constructed on a hill close to an Armenian military base between 2013 and 2017 and was used by militaries and their families. The construction was financed by the philanthropist Grigor Movsisyan (Monument Watch 04.05.2021). The Church was vandalized on October 14, when Azerbaijani soldiers threw down the cross from the roof and a paramilitary is said to have screamed “Allahu Akbar” [God is Great] standing on the fallen cross while the expression was repeated by other soldiers (OpIndia15.11.2020).

In a personal communication, Raffi Kortoshian, an expert on Armenian cultural heritage, told us that the ritual was performed by a Syrian fundamentalist; this was also confirmed by the Arabic dialect heard by some witnesses. Such a ritual has been used by Islamic fundamentalists when they conquer non-Muslim territories, as a victory sign, to bring the “word of God to the territory of the unbelievers [non-Muslims].” But the above also showed the transfer of symbolism and practices of Islamic fundamentalism from Syria to Nagorno Karabakh. This, in turn, created a narrative of ‘victory’. The event was recorded and spread in Azerbaijani social media on November 14, 2020. The day before the video was released, photos of the

desecrated Armenian Church Ghazanchetos in Shushi (see later) also appeared online (OpIndia 15.11.2020).

On March 25, 2021, the BBC reported that the Church was completely erased after the Azerbaijani Army took the settlement (Fisher, 25.03.2021). Meanwhile, desecrations and attacks against Armenian religious buildings continued in other villages, i.e., Karintak and Mataghis (Monument Watch 07.02.2022; Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 205-206).

- **Politically legitimizing the desecration of religious sites**

The XIX century roof of the Church of St. Yeghishe in the northeastern Nagorno Karabakh village of Mataghis, Martakert region, was severely damaged between September and October 2020. The Azerbaijani and Turkish units' desecration of the Church were videotaped and posted on internet by Azerbaijani soldiers. One of them said: "We are going to the church. I have prayed *namaz* [Muslim prayer] here twice." Another threw up a sacred image and kicked it. The Turkish flag was clearly visible on soldiers' uniforms (Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 205-206). Meanwhile, in the occupied Armenian village of Arakel, in Hadrut region of Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijani forces intentionally destroyed a 1997 Cross Stone using a military vehicle (Karabakh Records, 06.07.2021).

The above events were seen by local Armenians as blessed by the Azerbaijani and Turkish governments. However, the most outrageous event happened on March 15, 2021, when the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliev, visited the XII century Armenian Church of the Holy Mother of God in the occupied village of Tsakuri in the Hadrut region. The president showed some Armenian inscriptions and Cross-stones (1198 AD) and announced that they were 'false' and "the inscriptions that carved the crosses had just been engraved". He then added that his country will soon restore them and delete Armenian inscriptions (Monument Watch 04.05.2021).

The Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) of Armenia Arman Tatoyan described Aliyev's attack on Armenian heritage as ethno-religious hate at the highest government level, which testified to the Azeri policy of ethnic cleansing (Panarmenian.net 19.03.2021).

"The facts published [...] prove that during the September-November war in Artsakh, the [Azeri] authorities carried out ethnic cleansing and a policy of genocide; and, that policy continues today". (Panarmenian.net 19.03.2021)

- **Defending the relics**

The Bishop of Artsakh, Vrtanes Abrahamian described Azerbaijani units' attitudes towards the cross in the following terms:

“I do not even know how to describe it, it’s a terrible phenomenon. Seeing the cross, they [Azeri] immediately plunge into hatred, smashing, destroying [...] so, this is a serious plan formed by them”. (Sukiasyan 11.04.2022)

For Bishop Abrahamian, the Azerbaijani’s plan was to destroy Armenian historical and cultural monuments:

“They are depriving us of our historical identity in order to easily solve the problem of deporting the Armenians of Artsakh”. (Sukiasyan 11.04.2022)

The Second Karabakh War proved that, for ethnic Armenians, the defense of *khachkars* was worth their lives. The Armenian officer Gevorg Arshakyan was killed while hugging an old cross-stone near Shushi. His last words were:

“Don’t leave cross-stones”. (A1plus.am, 21.11.21)

Another famous case regards the Gospel and the ritual Cross that were inside the Church Zoravor St. Astvatsatsin [Holy Mother of God] in Mekhakavan/Jabrail (see subchapter Islamic rituals at the Church of Zoravor) and were saved by the two officers Gagik Harutyunyan and Davit Mirzoyan and the soldier Tigran Avetisyan. Gagik and Tigran got injured in the battlefield, it was thus Davit that brought out the Gospel and the Cross (Shoghakat TV 28.05.2022).

In response to Azerbaijani threats and organized destruction during and after the Second Karabakh War, several initiatives – led by Churches, youth groups and private citizens – took place to save Nagorno Karabakh cross-stones, crosses, bells, and other religious objects. Between them, they transferred all the cross-stones from the V century Tsitsernavank Monastery to Goris and Yerevan (Aleksanyan 12.12.2020). However, the Monastery, located in the Lachin District at some five kilometers from the Republic of Armenia, was returned to Azerbaijan on December 1, 2020, as part of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement. Nevertheless, some XVII centuries Armenian inscription had already disappeared when the area was under Azeri control, during the First Karabakh War (Karapetian 2001, 145).

As agreed in the ceasefire at the end of the Second Karabakh War, Armenian forces had to withdraw from the entire Kalbajar District, which included the renowned Armenian Apostolic Davidank Monastery which had to pass to Azerbaijani control. But the Abbot of the Monastery, Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, moved all relics deemed of relevance to the Republic of Armenia on time – including three famous XII century cross-stones which were transferred to Etchmiadzin – to protect them from the Azerbaijani ‘vandals’ (as he called them):

“If the vandals came here, they will do as they want, we do not want to lose the *khachkars*, which have a history of 800 years [...]. (Hovhannes Hovhannisyán quoted in Khachatryan 17.11.2020)

According to a joint Statement made by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan on 09 November, 2020 (Statement 09.11.2020), the Armenian forces had to withdraw from the Kelbajar region, including the Davidank Monastery area. On November 13, 2020, the Monastery was placed under the protection of Russian Peacekeeping forces. The entire Kalbajar District passed to Azerbaijani control on November 25, 2020 (Badalyan 14.11.2020).

The Holy See Press Service Director, Vahram Melikyan, said that the cross-stones (since then under Holy See custody) will return to the Monastery when the status of the Monastery and the situation around it is clear and, above all, if it will remain within ‘the borders of Artsakh’ (Khachatryan 17.11.2020).

On October 12, 2021, an exhibition was opened in Stepanakert titled *Մենք կվերադառնանք. փրկված պատմաշիկնեղ* [“We will return. Saved Fragments”]. Cultural and religious objects rescued from Azerbaijani-occupied settlements in Nagorno Karabakh were shown, between them there were items from Shushi and the bell of the Church of Hin Tagher (Hadrut region) and cross-stones (Civilnet.am 18.10.2021; Artsakhpress 12.10.2021).

During the Genocide of 1915, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin had also organized an initiative to save religious and cultural artefacts, relics, and manuscripts, especially from the Van region where ethnic Armenians were defending themselves against the Ottoman Army (Ter Avetisyan 2010, 12; Ter Vardanyan 2015).

Armenian Churches in Shushi as Targets

The landscape of the city of Shushi is considered by all Armenians as one of the most sacred spaces they have. But the entire area became a main target during and after the Second Karabakh War.

- **The Holy Savior Cathedral of Shushi**

For the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh, the Holy Savior Cathedral of Ghazanchetsots in Shushi is a major symbol of their history and identity. Already damaged in the March 1920 massacres, it became a main marker of both the First and Second Nagorno Karabakh wars’ narratives. During the First Nagorno Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani forces used the Cathedral as an armory to store missiles. The forced transformation of its sacred spaces became central in the Armenian narrative during the conflict and even after Shushi was captured by the Armenian forces on

May 9, 1992. The restoration began immediately after the city fell under Armenian control. The Cathedral was reconsecrated on June 18, 1998 and since then symbolized the ‘rebirth’ of the city. During the Second Karabakh War, the Cathedral was targeted several times. On October 8, 2020, it was struck twice with missiles. Two Russian journalists were wounded, one of them seriously. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), the Church, a major object of religious and cultural significance, was an intentional target. The attack, understood by Armenians in both mainland and in all Diasporic settings as an act of cultural cleansing, was immediately linked with the Armenian Genocide (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021, 42-43).

The Armenian Apostolic Archbishop of Artsakh, Pargev Martirosian, described the shelling as a deliberate insult “to the Cross” to force locals “into despair” (168.am. 09.10.2020.). He said:

“This [attack] is the signature of *international terror* [our italics]. A president, the terrorist Erdogan, prepares terrorists, keeps them, sends another terrorist president, Ilham Aliyev”. (168.am 09.10.2020)

An investigation led by the newspaper Hetq Online, showed that Azerbaijani forces had used a Turkish-made TRG-300 Kaplan guided missile to hit the Church (Sarukhanyan 30.05.2021). The Cathedral was then vandalized when Azerbaijani forces entered Shushi on 9-10 November, 2020 (Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 193). The symbolism behind the attack against the Cathedral alongside the simultaneous destruction of other Armenian churches of the town – including St. John Church (see next section) – was clear to local Armenians. Then highly political symbolic acts followed when the Azerbaijani forces entered the city. First, they put the Turkish flag on top of the fortress of Shushi (Papyan, 15.02.2021), at the entrance of the town. Second, they put the Azerbaijani flag on Shushi City Council building. These acts materialized Turkish presence, and the associated denialist ideology, in the city (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021).

Following the attack against the Cathedral of Shushi, both the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Armenian Apostolic Church issued statements condemning the ‘barbaric’ acts.

“[We condemn] the barbarism and atrocities against the civilian population of Artsakh, acts of vandalism against the *khachkars*, religious sites and monuments, and their deliberate destruction [...] In this regard, the desecration of the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi, which has become a target of the Azerbaijani barbarism, is especially outrageous”. (Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 15.11.2020)

“[We condemn] the barbarism against the religious and cultural monuments and shrines in Artsakh and manifestations of anti-Armenian dispositions by the Azerbaijani authorities [...] It must be impermissible for Azerbaijan, following the steps of its supporter Turkey, to continue its policy of cultural genocide, which has been pursued in various forms for decades in Azerbaijan and in the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic that is a part of it”. (Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin 14.11.2020)

Several reports soon confirmed that the Armenian cultural heritage was being vandalized or destroyed in all territories under Azerbaijani control. On May 3, 2021 Armenian sources reported that the dome and the Cross of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral were removed, and the building was covered in scaffolding. For the Armenians, again, the timing chosen by the Azerbaijani authorities was full of symbolism. The Representative of the State Service for Emergency Situations of Artsakh, Hunan Tadevosyan, who was the first to spread the photo, wrote:

“Ahead of May 9th [day of liberation of Shushi by the Armenians], the Turks [referring to Azerbaijanis] removed the domes of the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Cathedral”. (News.am 03.05.2022)

Responding to Armenian protests, Azerbaijani authorities replied that they had launched a ‘renovation’ of the Cathedral to have it in its original form by removing the metal conical roof above its dome. However, during the reconstruction works, a cross-stone located near the Cathedral went ‘missing’ (Karabakh Records 28.06.2021).

In the past, Azerbaijani media had indeed promoted the hypothesis that the Cathedral was Russian Orthodox, and originally had an Orthodox-style circular roof. The Azerbaijani Government position was thus to ‘restore’ the ‘original appearance’ of the church, that is, removing the pointed dome (main feature in Armenian Church architecture), which they claimed did not exist before. However, historical photos taken over a century ago proved that it was typical of Armenian-style (Nazaretyan 08.05.2021).

Indeed, destroyed during the 1920 Armenian massacres, the dome was not restored during the Soviet Era. In symbolic terms, for local Armenians, Azeri ‘restoration’ of the Cathedral legitimized the Armenian massacre of 1920.

The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin released a statement:

“A few days ago, we learned on the fact of removing the dome and abolishing the religious symbols of the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral of the Holy Savior in Shushi, under the guise of restoration works. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin condemns the cultural genocide perpetrated by the Azerbaijani authorities, which is an

undisguised expression of Armenian hatred, intolerance, and hostility. Contrary to the claims and excuses, this policy cannot in any way contribute to the restoration of stability and peace in the region”. (The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin 05.05.2021)

The magazine *Persecution* of the International Christian Concern was even more explicit:

“The fate of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral is unknown. Some speculation fears that it will face a similar fate as the Hagia Sophia, mirroring the same type of pan-Turkism that erodes Christianity in Turkey”. (Persecution.org 21.05.2021)

- **Saint John the Baptist Church or ‘Green Church’ in Shushi**

The Armenian Saint John [Hovhannes] the Baptist Church, also known as Kanach Zham [also known as the Green Church because of the original color of its dome] of Shushi was a major target once Azerbaijani forces entered the town on November 9, 2020. The church is in the western perched segment of the plateau in the historical Armenian Upper (or New) district from where the whole panorama of the city is visible.

The Church was first vandalized and then, according to Father Mesrop Mkrtychyan, former priest of the church, destroyed on November 12, 2020; its dome and bell tower were blown up. This happened three days after the joint Statement of November 9, 2020 (Martirosyan 06.07.2022).

The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin condemned the vandalism against the Church:

“Actions of Azerbaijan shows the decades-long policy of this country of erasing all the traces of Armenian historical presence in the historical land of the Armenians”. (Panorama.am 20.11.2020)

The Foreign Minister of Artsakh, Davit Babayan, referring to the destruction of Kanach Zham Church in Shushi by Azerbaijani forces, said:

“Azerbaijan’s actions against the historical-cultural monuments in the territories of Artsakh under Azerbaijani occupation is cultural genocide [...] The actions of Azerbaijanis in no way differ from the actions of terrorists in the Middle East, who destroy universal monuments”. (Armenpress 18. 03, 2021)

Azerbaijani authorities then started to deny any affiliation of the building to the Armenian Church and showed their intention to transform it into a Russian Church. Up to when, on July 4, 2022, the Artsakh’s State Service for the Protection of

Historical Environment confirmed that the Church of Saint John had been destroyed by the Azerbaijani Army (News.am 04.07.2022).

Monument Watch, an independent academic platform whose mission is to record, present and comment on the condition and changes of Artsakh Cultural Heritage, informed that,

“Photos circulated through Facebook a few days ago, on June 29, confirm the destruction of the church: the dome is destroyed, the holy throne and the holy altar are damaged, the candlesticks for lighting candles are broken, etc., and the sacred stones of the temple are turned into a pile of garbage”. (*Monument Watch* 08.07.2022)

“The fact that Azerbaijan completely destroyed the Armenian Church of Saint Hovhannes [John] [...] is strongly condemnable – said Artsakh’s State Minister Artak Beglaryan. According to him, under the guise of renovation, they [Azerbaijani] turned the church into an Orthodox church to falsify history and eliminate Armenian traces”. (*Ghazanchyan* 05.07.2022)

Artak Beglaryan also added that there was “continuation of cultural genocide by Azerbaijan” (*Ghazanchyan* 05.07.2022).

On an international level, on March 9, 2022, the European Union Parliament acknowledged that,

“The erasure of the Armenian cultural heritage is part of a wider pattern of a systematic, state-level policy of Armenophobia, historical revisionism and hatred towards Armenians promoted by the Azerbaijani authorities, including dehumanization, the glorification of violence”. (*EU Parliament* 09.03.2022)

‘White Crosses’ to Fight Evil

A major symbol displaced during the conflict was the ‘cross.’ Armenian soldiers wore crosses on their uniforms and armored vehicles, “making Armenian troops appear like modern crusaders” (*Abrahamian* 1996/1997, 273). But the cross was much more than a symbol of religious affiliation. According to the Armenian Apostolic Priest Psak Mkrtchyan, Pastor of the Holy Mother of God Church in Kanaker (Yerevan),

“For us, the cross is, first of all, a symbol of salvation. It is the sign of victory, because with that God defeated *evil* [our italics]; it is the symbol of God”. (*Panorama.am* 01.03.21)

“The cross became a symbol of victory and life over death [...] the cross is a shield to protect against evil forces”. (Chuljian 2001, 81-82)

In the Second Nagorno Karabakh War, the above practices resumed. Armenian soldiers started wearing ‘white crosses’ on their uniforms. As an informant, interviewed in Gavar (Armenia) on 13.06.2022, told us:

“It [the wearing of white crosses] had a moral and a psychological meaning which was coming from the First Karabakh War [...] We are Christians”.

It was the same Archbishop of Artsakh, Pergev Marirosyan, who in a meeting in the Armenian Church St. Sargis in Tehran (Iran) on December 20, 2002, explained the origin of the ‘white crosses’ put on Armenian soldiers’ uniforms and armored vehicles during the Shushi military operation in May 1992. Just before the operation started, Armenian soldiers visited him and asked for ‘crosses’ to protect them. But since there were not enough crosses for all Armenian militants, the soldiers started to draw ‘white crosses’ on their uniforms. Since then, the ‘white cross’ has become the official distinctive marker for the Armenian soldiers during Shushi’s military operation (Luys 2002, 2-3).

Archbishop Pargev Martirosian, in his *Divine Help for the Christian Soldier* (1995), a pocket-size booklet prepared for the Armenian soldiers during the First Nagorno Karabakh War, provided a meaningful model of behavior and basis to distinguish between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ under war conditions. He outlined the “spiritual values” of a Christian (Armenian) soldier and explained the “spiritual fortification of the soldier.” In order to “take up the armor of God”, he suggested to honor the Holy Cross as “an enemy-chasing power in the war” (Martirosian 1995, 15) referring to the old Christian tradition of Constantine’s vision and triumph under the Sign of the Cross (Tchilinigirian 2003, 170). Constantine the Great (306-337), first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity, in 312 defeated his rival to the throne Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, Rome. Before the battle, he is said to have seen a vision of a cross with the inscription *In hoc vinces* [In this, conquer] (Carboniero and Falconi 2011).

Nevertheless, authors like Tchilinigirian (2003, 263) hold a different view: in wearing the white cross,

“There was no religious connotation [...] the practice was rather a way of distinguishing the Armenian forces from the Azerbaijanis as both wore the same Soviet-style, Russian-supplied uniforms and gear”.

Emergency rituals to fight Evil: Cross of King Ashot's Cross

In order to protect the Armenian Army after the attack on the Cathedral of Shushi on October 8, 2020, the Armenian Apostolic Church sent the Cross of King Ashot II (said to include parts of the True Cross) to Nagorno Karabakh for a ceremonial blessing for peace and victory. King Ashot II (914-929) had fought several foreign attackers earning the nickname *Yerkat* [Iron] (Armenpress 20.10.2020). On the morning of October 20, 2020, Archbishop Martirosian, together with military chaplains (the Armenian Army Chaplaincy was established in 1997), blessed Armenian lands with the Cross. The Cross was then sent to the frontline to bless Armenian soldiers.

In both Nagorno Karabakh Wars, priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church performed religious rituals (baptism, liturgy, prayers) among frontline Armenian soldiers, often before the fights. During the Second Nagorno Karabakh War, several Armenian Apostolic priests voluntarily went to the frontline as spiritual servicemen.

The priest Enok Yesayan, a chaplain of Armenian Military Forces, said:

“The position of the Armenian Church is clearly evident from the depths of history. The Armenian Church has always preached peace, preaches and will preach peace. Starting from the War of Vardanants (451), from Sardarapat (1918) to our days, when the situation was dire, the Armenian Church urged to protect our sanctities, our holy land at any cost [...] the others do not have neighbors like the Turks [...] We should protect ourselves from *evil* [our italics]”. (Panorama.am 29.10.2020)

The Prelate of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Tavush district, Bishop Bagrat Galustianyan, added:

“I am leaving for our brave boys who keep our borders impregnable. I will return when I hear the news about peace [...] I pray that the arms of our heroic boys will never and never tremble, so that they can constantly destroy evil and the forces of evil, as the *Lord commands us* [our italics]”. (Sputnik Armenia 16.10.2020)

Old and New Martyrs: battlefields of resistance

On November 22, 2020, 12 days after the end of the Second Nagorno Karabakh War, a ceremony to commemorate the martyrs of Nagorno Karabakh was held at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin in Yerevan. Before the commemoration started, Catholicos Karekin II and the President of the Armenian Republic, Armen Sarkissian, declared that, for year 2020, ‘November 22’ had to be the Day of Remembrance for

the martyred heroes who had died in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War. On that day, commemorations were held in all Armenian churches (News.am 20.11.2020).

Churches in Armenia became the main *loci* from where funeral processions of Armenian soldiers were taking place.

“From the last [Second Nagorno Karabakh] War, we understood in reality who is a martyr”. (Father Vahan Azaryan, interviewed in Vanadzor (Armenia) on 03.08.2021)

Another informant said:

“Now our Church is there, in Yerablur [a military cemetery in Yerevan where the victims of First and Second Karabakh Wars are buried]. Yerablur is Church. We should make visits there”. (Taxi-driver, interviewed on 03.01.2021, in Yerevan)

Cultural narratives and the practice of resistance during the war referred often to the Armenian Commander Vardan Mamikonian and his comrades-in-arms who died in the Battle of Avarayrin in 451.

“The hero of this war was St. Vartan the Brave. All those who gave their lives in this war are called collectively the Vartanians”. (Kaloustian 1969, 25)

They are martyrs for the Armenian Apostolic Church, which set the festivity of St. Vardan and his Companions on the Thursday that falls eight weeks before Easter, that is, the week before Lent starts.

When on December 2, 2021, Karekin II participated in the funeral of nine Armenian soldiers, he spoke of ‘martyred heroes’, who, on the battlefield,

“Gained strength, were strengthened by the motto of Vardanants’ heroic struggle *Unconscious death is death, conscious death is immortality*”. (Armenpress 02.12.2021)

The Battle of Avarayr and the martyrdom of Vardan were patterns of resistance in Armenian tradition. The Battle had made a clear separation between Christian Armenians and the ‘evil’, ‘impious’ forces which had continuously attacked Armenian religion and identity since the time of the Persian Empire in the V century.

“In addition to the inserting martyrdom at the heart of Armenian history [...] By falling in battle in 451 Vardan entered modern Armenian consciousness as a national hero to be celebrated and emulated”. (Panossian 2006, 48)

As Tololyan submitted:

“The emblematic warrior of the Armenian nation is also its paradigmatic martyr, perfectly combining secular and religious virtues. The contemporary interpretation retains the vocabulary and imagery of the Church’s tradition but regards as a Vartan-figure any layman willing to risk all for the nation”. (Tololyan 1987a, 95)

The Battle of Avarayr has been part of the Armenian Church calendar since Vardan and his followers were elevated to sainthood in the V century. The commemoration has however become much wider than a religious celebration as Avarayr and Vardanare are also interpreted and symbolized as national resistance icons against oppression, because they represent the struggle in defense of the Church, the Nation, truth and justice (Panossian 2006, 48).

As Tololyan (1987a, 94) suggests, since the XIX century, in the process of secularization of the tale of Saint Vardan, three words have always resisted: witness, martyr and (line frequently invoked in speeches, sermons, laments and funeral orations) ‘death knowingly grasped is immortality’. The line is here pivotal to

“The willingness of Saint Vartan and his followers to risk all in defense of Armenian Christianity, conceived then (as now) as a crucial component of national identity”. (Tololyan1987a, 94)

The Battle of Avarayr and Vardan were emblematic in the Armenian revolutionary, national and-liberation movement, and resistance in the Ottoman Empire (Panossian 2006, 196-197; Tololyan 2007b, 222-225).

Another narrative related to Armenian resistance in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War was the 1918 Battle of Sardarabad (40 km from Yerevan) against the Ottoman Army. The Battle, part of the World War One Caucasus Campaign, took place from the 21st to the 29th of May 1918, and was fought between Armenian military units and irregular militia on one side, and the Ottoman Army on the other side. The Battle of Sardarabad not only halted the Ottoman advance in Armenia, but prevented the destruction of the Armenian nation. As Christopher Walker (1990) pointed out, had the Armenians lost this battle:

“It is perfectly possible that the word Armenia would have henceforth denoted only an antique geographical term”. (Walker 1990, 254-255)

During the Second Nagorno Karabakh War, the narrative of the Battle of Sardarabad was directly linked to the memory of the Armenian Genocide and to the resistance against the invading forces. Turkish involvement is here represented in its historical succession of fear as well as resistance. The Battle holds a special place in

the Armenian historical memory and it is often compared to the 451 Battle of Avarayr:

“After the catastrophe of the Genocide these battles became the paradigm of the survival of the Armenian nation, akin to the battle of Avarayr in 451”. (Panossian2006, 251)

The leaders of the First Armenian Republic (1918-20) frequently invoked the name of the battle, exhorting the people to be inspired by those who had fought in it (Hovannisian 1996, 199 and 267).

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, addressing the nation on October 3, 2020 said that,

“The Armenian nation in Artsakh and in Armenia has been resisting the terrorist offensive unleashed by Azerbaijan and Turkey [whose] key target is the Armenian nation. Their objective is to carry on with their genocidal policy [...] This is a new Sardarapat [Sardarabad], and we all should be prepared to devote ourselves to a single mission that we call final victory”. (Pashinyan 03.10.2020)

On October 21, 2022, the Archbishop of Artsakh, Pergev Martirosian said:

“I am sure that as in Sardarapat, as well as today, where our fate is being decided, we will solve our issues with our national strength and participation”. (Martirosian 20.10.2020)

In practice, as it had happened in the Battle of Avarayr in 451, both in the Battle of Sardarabad in 1918 and during the 44-day Second Nagorno Karabakh War, the priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church were actively involved. In 2021, after the War, clergymen who took part in the War were awarded the order of St. Ghevond the Yerets. The order had been established after the Second Nagorno Karabakh War by the Holy Seat of Etchmiadzin. St Ghevond was a Church leader and an active member of the 451 struggles; he was captured in the Battle of Avarayr and martyred in captivity (Mother See 15.07.2021; Sargsyan 2002, 655-656).

Epilogue: Historical progression of resistance to Evil

The Second Nagorno Karabakh War had an inherent transnational dimension in terms of direct Turkish involvement and import of violence from Northern Syria through the relocation of Syrian mercenaries, Salafi and Jihadi units, and Turkmen groups. In addition, a globalized dimension of the war was manifest in worldwide attacks

against Armenian communities and Genocide Memorials (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021). Concurrently, direct Turkish involvement reproduced denialist and Genocide related narratives and practices, a process still in progress to which Armenian Resistance keeps opposing paradigms of national struggle such as Avarayar and Vartan. These are everlasting means imbued of religious significance, as clear in the words of Father Psak Mkrtyan: “a symbol of salvation [...] because with that God defeated evil” (Mkrtyan quoted in Panorama 01.03.2021).

Since the end of March 2022 images surfaced on social media showing that a famous Armenian Genocide memorial in Shushi was leveled to the ground by Azeri forces in December 2020. Placed in 1998 in the Upper District area, at the intersection of Proshyan and Ghazanchetsots streets, it was also close to the Cathedral. The Memorial was dedicated to the victims of both Second World War and First Nagorno Karabakh War. Above its ruins an Azerbaijani flag was erected and the place was renamed ‘Square of Azerbaijani flag’. It was there that President Aliyev stood and met Azerbaijani soldiers when he visited Shushi on January 15, 2021 (Artsakh Fact-finding Report 2022, 216; Monument Watch 16.05.2021). For Armenians worldwide this meant a denialist attempt to ‘Azerbaijanize’ the town.

The above explains why Armenian behavior in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War can only be understood via the memory of the Armenian Genocide. For Armenians, the Azerbaijani (=Turkish) involvement in the conflict is simply reproducing old forms of political, social and cultural practices. This prompted the Armenian resistance; resistance against Evil, which was materialized by the Turkish-Azerbaijani war alliance, religiously and culturally legitimated by the Biblical term used by the Armenian for *Yeghern*. Victims could be considered *martyrs* because they died for their religious faith and identity, which overlap the parallel process of their secularization as models of national heroism. Armenian nation behavior was thus justified by the need to protect its very existence against Evil forces. However, the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance meant also the development of cultural narratives linked to Turkish denialism of the Armenian Genocide and the glorification of Ottoman Genocide-related prominent figures, ritual killings, and violence against Armenians. Evil forces also attacked Armenian cultural heritage and its religious symbols (churches, *khachkars*) as part of what ethnic Armenians saw as Genocidal practices and cultural cleansing which involved vandalism and desecrations of Armenian sacred and memorial spaces.

Beside the Genocide, the martyrological tradition that relates to Saint Vardan and the 451 Avarayr Battle tradition (which extends to Sardarapat Battle of 1918) provided a frame for narratives and practices of resistance during the conflict waged against Evil forces. Indeed, the St. Vardan-Avarayr paradigm structured cultural and social practice as resistance against Evil allowing the Armenian Church to act in the Karabakh Wars as in the 1915 Genocide, i.e., organizing the salvation of Christian

Armenian heritage artefacts, relicts and monuments. Meanwhile Armenian clergyman were extensively involved in emergency religious rituals on the frontline.

In turn, a framework of Turkish and Azeri denialism became part of the ideology of the Second Karabakh War because the conflict employed denial-related symbols, narratives, and practices. These were mainly linked to transnational actors (e.g., Syrian Turkmen and Grey Wolves) and penetrated a transnational dimension (e.g., Armenian Genocide Memorials in France) thus enhancing the use of violence (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021). In such a context, Armenians saw Turkish attempts to change the ethno-demographic composition of Nagorno Karabakh through cultural engineering and a process of Turkification which built not just upon past genocidal events but also upon more recent events in contemporary Northern Syria. Violence was imported from Northern Syria to South Caucasia through the employment of anti-Armenian Evil forces, ideologically-driven Salafī and Syrian Turkmen militants as well as Jihadi terror groups. This process drew upon transnational links to reproduce denial narratives and convert them into violence against Armenian diasporic communities. Thus, it did not seem accidental that during the Second Karabakh War the first Armenian community to be targeted was the one dwelling in Istanbul, where space, victims and persecutors were nominally the same as in 1915. It is a logical and ideological progression of this transnational spatial and symbolic dimension which reproduced denial narratives while glorifying Genocide-related prominent icons such as Enver Pasha and Nouri Pasha and the Caucasus Islamic Army, and by blatantly appropriating religious symbols (e.g., Kars Armenian Cathedral) and linking them with war games, including military parades in Baku or Turkish-Azerbaijani military exercises at the Turkish-Armenian border (Hakobyan and Mollica 2021).

In such a frame, the historical progression that links the Nagorno Karabakh Wars to the memory of the Armenian Genocide is an important factor to understand the cultural, social, political aspects at various levels. First, the direct support and involvement of the Republic of Turkey in the 2020 Second Karabakh War created political and cultural narratives that immediately related to the memory of the (1915) Armenian Genocide in both Republic of Armenia and Armenian Diasporic settings all around the world. Second, Evil materialized from the past based on the memory of the Genocide. Violence against Armenians was constructed upon denialism, glorification of Genocide prominent figures, ritual killings and attacks, destruction of monuments of Armenian collective memory and cultural identity. Third, the cultural and social practice of resistance, as had happened during the Genocide, was repeated in the Second Nagorno Karabakh War to save Armenian Christian heritage. Thus, the protection of relicts and art crafts became a form of resistance against Evil.

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