



THE BARONESS COX  
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15 February 2022

Dear Colleague,

I write to express my deep concern about the fate of Armenian Christian churches, Khachkars (carved stone crosses) and cultural heritage sites in Nagorno Karabakh, which are now under Azerbaijan's control. The sites include 161 churches, including the historic monastery at Dadivank, Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi, the ancient city of Tigranakert, Azokh Paleolithic Cave and the Nor Karmiravan tombs.

In November 2020, UNESCO sought to undertake an independent mission to draw an inventory of the sites, as a first step towards safeguarding the region's heritage. They have approached Azerbaijan on numerous occasions for access to the sites – to no avail.

In December 2021, the International Court of Justice said Azerbaijan should 'take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including but not limited to churches and other places of worship, monuments, landmarks, cemeteries and artefacts.' Yet in February 2022, Azerbaijan set up a new working group to 'remove fictitious traces written by Armenians on Albanian religious temples.'

This is historical revisionism – a campaign of appropriation that dates back to the 1950s, whereby Azerbaijani authorities continue to rewrite history and replace the word 'Armenia / Armenian' with 'Caucasian Albania / Caucasian Albanian.'

The inception of the working group is a serious cause for concern, especially in light of the previous systematic erasure of centuries-old Armenian religious sites in Nakhichevan, an historically Armenian land relocated by Stalin in Azerbaijan. I was present in Nakhichevan in the early 1990s when Azeri military forces were driving tens of thousands of Armenians from their homes in their ancient homeland, a policy of religio-ethnic cleansing that was revived in the autumn of 2020. Between 1997-2006, Azerbaijan destroyed tens of thousands of UNESCO-protected Armenian monuments in Nakhichevan. Every visible evidence of their presence was eradicated so there is now no visible testimony to their existence (more information about Nakhichevan below).

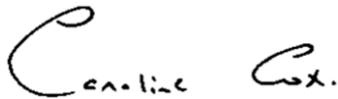
The destruction of cultural and religious heritage is a war crime under international law. The first successful prosecution, at The International Criminal Court in The Hague, for intentionally

destroying cultural sites was in 2016 following the conviction of Ahmed al-Faqi al-Mahdi for his role in the destruction of nine mausoleums and the door of a mosque in the Malian city of Timbuktu in 2012. The perpetrator was sentenced to nine years in prison only after expressing remorse and with a reduction for a plea of guilty. Ahmed al-Faqi al-Mahdi could have been sentenced to a maximum of 30 years, which should be an indication of how seriously the international community has taken such grave crimes.

In a statement made at the time, UNESCO declared: ‘Deliberate attacks on culture have become weapons of war in a global strategy of cultural cleansing seeking to destroy people as well as the monuments bearing their identities, institutions of knowledge and free thought.’

I would be very grateful if you could raise these urgent concerns with your network and supporters. I would also be grateful for your advice about how we could work together to ensure the protection of these historic Christian sites.

With very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline Cox." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Baroness Cox

## **FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT NAKHCHIVAN**

- > Nakhchivan is an Azerbaijani exclave that borders Iran and Armenia.
- > Destruction of Armenian monuments in Nakhchivan included an attack in 2005-06 on Djulfa cemetery.
- > Azerbaijani soldiers, armed with sledgehammers and cranes, destroyed hundreds of hand-carved cross-stones at the cemetery. The soldiers reportedly dumped the debris into a nearby river.
- > In total, an estimated 28,000 monuments were destroyed at Djulfa cemetery between 1997-2006, including 89 medieval churches, 5,840 cross-stones (the earliest dating back to the 6th century) and 22,000 ancient tombstones.
- > The cemetery has reportedly been replaced by a military rifle range, although this is difficult to corroborate as the Government of Azerbaijan refuses entry to international inspectors.
- > Satellite research shows that, in 2003, the uneven, textured landscape was dotted with multiple small structures. By 2009, it was flattened and empty.

> It is categorised widely as an attempted erasure by Azerbaijan of its Armenian religious and cultural heritage, which analysts claim exceeds Islamic State's self-promotional dynamiting of Palmyra. They describe it as 'the greatest cultural genocide of the 21st century'. See analysts' report here: <https://hyperallergic.com/482353/a-regime-conceals-its-erasure-of-indigenous-armenian-culture/>

> 'The New Tears of Araxes', a short film by Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman, shows the destruction of Djulfa cemetery. It is available on YouTube here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZu2zqFE\\_gI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZu2zqFE_gI)