

Liberated Karabakh

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The Paramount Significance of Shusha

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The volume of research concerning the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been steadily increasing, especially in recent years, and has covered various aspects of the topic. This is one of the longest, and definitely among the bloodiest, conflicts in Eastern Europe, claiming the lives of almost 50,000 people and causing more than one million individuals to leave their homes. More than three decades of modern history has passed since its onset—mostly under the shadow of the Armenian occupation of the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan; until 2020, that is, when Azerbaijan liberated Karabakh and the surrounding regions from Armenian armed forces. Nevertheless, there are still outstanding issues relating to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in a small portion of the aforementioned Azerbaijani territories.

Despite the growing volume of scholarship, there is still a lack of research regarding the conflict-related context of the city of Shusha—capital of the former Karabakh khanate and a city that stands at the core of the modern conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. To my knowledge, there exists just one study (at least in English) on this critical issue, authored by Elchin Amribayov in 2001 and entitled “Shusha’s Pivotal Role in a Nagorno-Karabagh Settlement.”¹ In the meantime, Shusha has assumed critical symbolic significance in addition to its military, political, administrative, and cultural importance. This chapter is intended to shed much-neglected light on this set of issues.

The modern conflict has a previous history of ethnic clashes, beginning in 1905, which escalated in 1918-1920 when two countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan, briefly became independent before the Bolshevik takeover. This century-long animosity, however, is based on no history of ancient hatred, as the two ethnic groups lived side by side for centuries in a largely peaceful manner, coexisting and cohabiting, and engaging in various forms of cultural exchange and even intermarriage.

The modern phase of the conflict, which began in the era of advanced media technology, gave birth to very sophisticated propaganda. The Armenian side had advantages in its public campaign against Azerbaijan, as its strong diaspora in the West had access to the media, academia, and policymakers in a way the much less numerous and much less affluent Azerbaijani diaspora did not. These advantages were leveraged in such a way as to promote the cause of the Armenian territorial claim on the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan using various arguments: Christian unity, the history of suffering (some real, some conflated or even invented), twisted ideas of self-determination, and others.² The narrative was pregnant with many historical claims on heritage in the region, and several major stories were manufactured in a relatively short period of time, mostly after the beginning of the modern conflict in 1987-1988.

While Armenian historians prior to 1987-1988 claimed a longstanding presence of Armenians in Karabakh, Nakhchivan, and other parts of modern-day Azerbaijan, the city of Shusha, which was founded in 1752 by the Turkic (Azerbaijani) ruler Panah Ali Khan, had, until recently, avoided the fate of such heated debate, even though the city itself suffered from interethnic clashes in 1905-1906 and 1919-1920. However, after Armenian armed forces occupied the city on 8 May 1992, Armenian nationalists put forward post facto claims regarding its historical and cultural attribution to Armenians. An examination of most of the references in mass media, social networks, or Wikipedia reveals that most Armenian authors published their research on Shusha after 1987.

As already mentioned, the city was founded in 1752 by the ruler of Karabakh, Panah Ali Khan, and was originally called Panahabad.³ The city was located on a high plateau, 1,400 meters above sea level, overlooking surrounding areas, which made it, from a military point of view, strategically

important. Until 1823, the city was the capital of the Karabakh khanate, although by 1805 the khanate had already joined the Russian Empire which, during a war with the Sublime State of Iran that lasted from 1804 to 1813, conquered roughly the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan, then consisting of several khanates. In the early years, the Russian administration allowed the Karabakh khans to continue exerting local control, but, in 1822, the khanate was turned into a Russian province. The last khan fled to Iran, and about 3,000 Azerbaijanis moved with him.⁴

Beginning in the late 1820s, the Russian Empire began systematically implementing a policy of resettling Armenians on the territory of the former Azerbaijani khanates, which significantly changed the demographic balance in the region.⁵ According to Russian sources,⁶ in Karabakh in 1823, 450 out of 600 villages were Azerbaijani and about 150 Armenian. About 1,048 Azerbaijani and 474 Armenian families lived in Shusha. In 1828-1832, the Russian authorities conducted their first resettlement project, bringing Armenians from Iran and the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Caucasus, including Karabakh. Thus, the number of Armenian families in Shusha increased by 2,000 while the number of Muslim, or Azerbaijani, families decreased by 1,600. During 1828-1832, the Armenian population in Shusha increased from 27.5 percent to 44.9 percent. This demographic trend continued, and, by 1897, when Russia conducted an empire-wide census, the Armenian population in Shusha had become the majority, at 55 percent.⁷

During the first Russian revolution of 1905-1907, the Caucasus witnessed the first interethnic clashes between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, which also affected Shusha. According to the Governor-General of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, Armenian gangs, led by the nationalist Dashnaktsutyun Party, attacked Azerbaijani settlements with the intent of establishing “territories with one continuous Armenian population, in order to prepare the ground for the creation of an autonomous Armenia in the future.”⁸

After the collapse of the Russian Empire, two newly independent states, Azerbaijan and Armenia, became embroiled in a war over Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhchivan. Several times, Shusha was subjected to Armenian armed attacks led by General Andranik. Only in August 1919 was Azerbaijan able to establish control over Karabakh, and the Armenians

agreed to the temporary rule of Azerbaijani General Khosrov Sultanov. On 22-23 March 1920, during the celebration of the Novruz holiday by Azerbaijanis, the Armenians staged an armed uprising in Shusha and began to massacre the Azerbaijani population. However, the Azerbaijanis quickly organized a defense and attacked the Armenian quarter of the city, which was heavily damaged.

After the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan, the Bolshevik leadership decided to transfer Zangezur to Armenia and intended to do the same with Karabakh but, after long and heated discussions, decided to leave Karabakh within Azerbaijan, locating its administrative center in Shusha. On 7 July 1923, the Bolsheviks artificially carved out from the historical Karabakh region a territory with a predominantly Armenian population and thus created the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), with its center in Khankendi—a city almost immediately renamed Stepanakert by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, nicknamed the “Caucasian Lenin.” According to the 1926 Soviet census,⁹ the population of NKAO was 125,200 people, with 89.2 percent identifying as Armenians. However, Shusha’s population was predominantly Azerbaijani and remained so until the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to the country’s 1979 census, the inhabitants of Shusha numbered 10,784, with Azerbaijanis accounting for 85 percent of the city’s total population.¹⁰

After both Armenia and Azerbaijan regained their respective independence in 1991, Shusha became a victim of Armenian occupation. The circumstances were duplicitous: on 7 May 1992, an Iranian-brokered ceasefire agreement was reached in Tehran between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan; the very next day, Armenian forces violated the deal and occupied Shusha. After they captured the city, “marauders and vandals were burning it to the ground.”¹¹

For 28 years, until 8 November 2020, the city was under Armenian occupation. Its entire Azerbaijani population was expelled, and many cultural monuments were destroyed. Throughout the occupation, the Armenian authorities tried to increase Shusha’s population—and of the entire Karabakh region—through illegal settlement.¹² This practice continued until the beginning of the Second Karabakh War; for example,

a few days before it began, a few Armenian families from Lebanon were settled in the occupied city.¹³

The battle for Shusha was important primarily due to its strategic location. However, in addition to its military significance, the city bears symbolic meaning based on the history of the settlement as the cultural and commercial center of Karabakh.

Many famous Azerbaijani musicians, poets, and artists were born in the city: Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885-1948), the founder of Azerbaijani classical music and the creator of the first opera in the Muslim world, “Leyli and Majnun”; the classic and folk song singer Bulbul (1897-1961); the singer Rashid Behbudov (1915-1989); the mugham singer Khan Shushinskiy (1901-1979); the composer Sultan Hajibeyov (1919-1974); the composer and orchestra conductor Niyazi (1912-1984); and many others. Mention must be made of Khurshudbanu Natavan (1832-1897), an Azerbaijani poet and philanthropist who was the daughter of the last Karabakh khan Mehtikuli-khan and the granddaughter of Ibrahim Khalil-khan. She lived and worked in Shusha and headed its literary circle. Under her patronage, a palace, a mosque, schools, and a water supply system were built in the city. Mollah Panah Vagif (1717-1797), poet, diplomat, and vizier, lived his entire life in the city. The famous playwright and diplomat Yusif Vezirov-Chamanzamanli (1887-1943) was also born in Shusha.

Shusha pioneered many cultural activities among Azerbaijanis. In 1848, the first Azerbaijani theatrical performance was organized in the city; and by 1882 Shusha had become an important theater center. The famous playwright Abdurrahim Hagverdiyev (1870-1933), the literary critic Firidun Kocharli (1863-1920), the wonderful folk singer Jabbar Garyagdi (1861-1944), and the journalist and publisher Hashim Vazirov (1868-1916) also lived in Shusha.

A famous political and public figure of Azerbaijan and Turkey, the journalist and teacher Ahmed Aga-oglu (1869-1939) was born and raised in Shusha.¹⁴ In 1896, he opened the first library in the city. During the Russian Revolution of 1905-1907 he created a secret organization, *Difai* (Defense) to fight the nationalist Armenian gangs. Ahmed Agha-oglu actively fought for the rights of women and the expansion of education among Muslims and participated in the publication of newspapers in the Azerbaijani language. In 1909, he was forced to move to the Ottoman Empire and continued his

socio-political advocacy, though he returned for a brief period during the independent Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-1920), and even became a member of parliament. After the formation of the Republic of Turkey, he was a member of parliament, head of the Anadolu news agency, and an active participant in the drafting of the country's constitution. One of his daughters, Süreyya, who was born in Shusha, became the first female student of the Faculty of Law at Istanbul University and became the first woman lawyer in Turkey. Another daughter, Tezer, who was also born in Shusha, became the first woman to be appointed director of a boys' school in Turkey and went on to serve as a member of parliament for more than a decade.

Thus, many political and cultural figures achieved fame beyond the boundaries of Azerbaijan. That helped to make Shusha an integral part of the Azerbaijani national identity by the beginning of the twentieth century, before the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. During the tenure of Javad-bay Safarlibayov as mayor of the city (1904-1907), Shusha turned into a center of political thought in the South Caucasus. Several political movements, such as *Geyrat* (Honor) and the aforementioned *Difai*, operated in the city and promoted national-liberation ideas among Azerbaijanis.

The spatial significance of Shusha was associated with other, contextual meanings. During the Soviet era, the city also became a major tourist destination and, in 1977, by a decision of the Azerbaijan Soviet Council of Ministers, Shusha was declared a resort city. In the late 1980s, the city began to host the Khari-Bulbul Music Festival in honor of the unique orchid (*Ophris genus*) that grows in the region. The festival embodied the music and politics of the period that marked the beginning of the conflict with Armenia. Heavily focused on traditional folk music, the festival shone an additional spotlight on the importance of Shusha to Azerbaijan's cultural identity. The festival was re-established in 2021, soon after the end of the 28-year occupation of the city. It featured many folk music ensembles and orchestras, including those composed of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan such as the Talysh and Lezgi, whose representatives fought in the war against the external aggression. Armenia has attempted, unsuccessfully, to exploit minority issues within Azerbaijan, especially the Talysh one.¹⁵ The reestablishment of the festival, with its broad ethnic mosaic, was aimed at manifesting unity within Azerbaijan as well as its ownership over the region.

It should be noted that the Armenians also consider Shusha an important cultural and political center (their name for the city is Shushi). However, this narrative become stronger only after the start of the occupation of Shusha in 1992. Even in Soviet times, textbooks published in Armenia indicated the city's placename as "Shusha."¹⁶ The internet, including Wikipedia, is full of Armenian claims about the city being an ancient Armenian settlement, but there is little mainstream evidence written before 1992 that the city has a history going back to before 1752 or that it is linked to an Armenian origin. There are some sources that claim that the location for the city's foundation was advised to the Karabakh khan by a local Armenian landlord, Melik Shahnazar, who was his vassal; however, the city-fortress was built from scratch, not on the foundations of an earlier structure. In the *History of Karabakh* written by Mirza Jamal Javanshir (circa 1847), the author says that "he [Panakh Ali Khan] went there together with several of his entourage and, having examined [the area], proceeded to build the fortress."¹⁷

While Armenian nationalists deplored the loss of Shusha in 2020, the Armenian authorities made little investment there during the occupation. After the Second Karabakh War, the incumbent Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, once even bitterly exclaimed that, if the city was so important for Armenians, why was it such a "sad city"?¹⁸ British journalist Thomas De Waal, who visited the city in 2000, recalls that "the lonely steeple of Gazanchetsots [an Armenian Church], rising above a still-ruined town, suggests that it is still more a symbol than a real town that people will readily inhabit [...]. More recently, to pursue the crusader image, most Armenians have come here either to loot or to pray—but not to live."¹⁹

In the meantime, Armenian nationalists tried to erase the Azerbaijani heritage of the city by destroying many monuments; for example, those to Vagif, Bulbul, and Natavan. In the best cases, surviving heritage was presented as Iranian (read: Persian), as was the case for the Yukhari Govhar Agha mosque, which was "renovated" by the Iranian state and rebranded as being a part of Persian heritage.

The issue of Shusha was probably one the most complex items in the negotiation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is a known fact that the modern conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan began in 1987-1988

with the slogan *miatsum*, which in Armenian means unification—in this case, of the NKAO with Armenia. Although both republics were part of the USSR, Armenia openly claimed the territory of Azerbaijan and, on 1 December 1989 even adopted a resolution to incorporate the NKAO into Soviet Armenia. This decision was contrary to the Soviet constitution and laws and was thus nullified by the Supreme Soviet (the USSR’s parliament).²⁰ After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenian nationalists changed tactics and claimed the right of self-determination for the people of the NKAO. The occupation of the NKAO and seven surrounding regions during 1992-1993 provided the Armenian side with a plan to seek to bargain the “independence” of the former NKAO for the return of the seven neighboring regions. The so-called Madrid Principles of 2007-2009 stipulated the return of the seven regions outside of Nagorno-Karabakh and the organization of a vote within Nagorno-Karabakh on its status. While Armenia insisted on the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani side saw the vote on the status as a step for granting the highest degree of autonomy. Another important item of the Madrid principles was the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, which meant the return of the majority of the Azerbaijani population to Shusha: paragraph 5 stipulates “the right of *all* internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence.”²¹

Eventually, in March-April 2020, the Armenian side abandoned the Madrid principles, and, prior to that, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan exclaimed that “Artsakh [Karabakh] is Armenia,” thus effectively ending the whole understanding of the negotiations.²² However, during the talks between the two countries, the status of Shusha was an important element for the restoration of justice and the subsequent return of Azerbaijani refugees to the town. In 2001, Elchin Amirbayov, an Azerbaijani diplomat currently serving as an advisor to the First Vice-President, wrote:

While many Azerbaijanis recognize the need for certain mutual concessions as part of any peace settlement and the need to ensure the security of the Armenian population of the region, they also believe that the rights and security of the Azerbaijani population of Nagorno-Karabagh should not be forfeited just because this population was forced to leave their homes almost ten years ago.²³

However, the Armenian side, through all the bargaining over the seven regions outside Nagorno-Karabakh, had never considered the possibility of accepting the Azerbaijani refugees back to the city. Thomas De Waal highlighted, in his 2003 book, that “almost no Armenians will countenance the return of Shusha’s Azerbaijani inhabitants in an eventual peace deal.”²⁴ Even during the Second Karabakh War, when Russian President Vladimir Putin tried to broker a ceasefire in the course of an obvious Armenian defeat, the Armenian prime minister replied in the negative to a proposal that would have allowed the return of Azerbaijani refugees to the city whose control would be maintained by the Armenian side. After the war, the Russian president disappointingly remarked:

Unexpectedly for me, the position of our Armenian partners was that they perceived this as something unacceptable. [...] Prime Minister Pashinyan told me openly that he viewed this as a threat to the interests of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. I do not quite understand the essence of this hypothetical threat, I mean, it was about the return of civilians to their homes, while the Armenian side was to have retained control over this section of Nagorno-Karabakh, including Shusha, and meaning that our peacekeepers were there, which we have agreed upon both with Armenia and Azerbaijan.²⁵

In principle, the Armenian side—during the entire negotiation process—tried to solidify the results of the occupation and feigned engagement with the talks. Such an intransigent position of the Armenian side on all issues, including Shusha, eventually led to the Second Karabakh War and the country’s humiliating defeat.

Moreover, in 2020, several actions of the Armenian side infused a sense of humiliation among Azerbaijanis. First, after the illegal April election, unrecognized by the international community, the leader of Karabakh’s illegitimate regime, Arayik Aratyunyan, held a swearing-in ceremony in Shusha, unlike previous leaders who had done so in Khankendi. Then, he announced a plan to move the regime’s local parliament to Shusha. Joshua Kucera, reporter for Eurasianet.org, remarked in this regard:

Much of that [city's] history is Turkic and Muslim, and before the war the population of Shushi—which Azerbaijanis spell Shusha—was mostly Azerbaijani. Shushi's new Armenian overseers have been steadily sidelining that history and reframing it as an essentially Armenian city.²⁶

The announcement was seen internationally as a strong provocation. But before that, on 9 May 2020, on the 27th anniversary of the occupation of Shusha, which Armenians celebrated as “liberation,” Pashinyan personally joined the dance group in Jidir-Duzu, a highly symbolic and historic place for Azerbaijanis.²⁷ Here it is important to underline that Jidir-Duzu (the plain of Jidir), which is located in the immediate vicinity of Shusha, served for centuries as the city's main location for the conduct of public festivities, including Novruz (traditional New Year) and traditional sporting events such horse racing. During the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, emphasized that “when drunk Pashinyan danced in Shusha on Jidir-Duzu, he signed up for what happened today.”²⁸

The battle for Shusha during the Second Karabakh War also has an important meaning with respect to Azerbaijan's military victory. Many pundits, speaking about the war, point to the technical superiority of the Azerbaijani army, which used high-tech military equipment, especially drones purchased from Turkey. But the battle for Shusha manifested the superiority of the training, physical and moral fitness, and determination of Azerbaijani special forces, who were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a greater number of Armenians deployed behind the city's fortress. About 400 personnel, carrying minimal food and equipment, went through the forest, scaled the toughest slopes and cliffs, and attacked the city. “This is something that a movie should be made about,” said John Spencer, Chair of Urban Warfare Studies at West Point's Modern War Institute.²⁹ Drawing lessons from the battle for Shusha, Spencer and his co-author emphasize that urban warfare remains a key part of modern combat.³⁰

The liberation of Shusha on 8 November 2020 became the defining moment of the Second Karabakh War, which ended the next day. Thus, in addition to its cultural significance, Shusha became a symbol of liberation from foreign occupation and the restoration of justice and international law.

Shusha continues to acquire new meanings. In addition to the process of restoration and renovation, the city became the location for the leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkey to sign the Shusha Declaration on 15 June 2021. This declaration reaffirmed the development of bilateral relations and confirmed an alliance of mutual cooperation against threats to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two states. The president of Azerbaijan emphasized that the signing of this document in liberated Shusha was significant for the whole of Eurasia.³¹ It ushered in a new era whereby Russian pressure and dominance will not remain unchallenged if Moscow were to decide to support its traditional ally, Armenia, in furthering its territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Three months later, in an interview with the Anadolu news agency, he underlined that “if all neighbors built their relations like Turkey and Azerbaijan, then there would be no wars in the world.”³² The Turkish president also called on Armenia to join Turkey's proposed 3+3 regional cooperation format, which would additionally include Georgia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran.³³

The whole region is at a juncture regarding whether the South Caucasus will move on to peace and cooperation or will be stuck in conflicts and territorial claims. Armenia still aims at keeping the issue of “Nagorno-Karabakh's status” on the agenda of the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan—a claim supported by the Co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (France, Russia, and the United States), albeit for different reasons. In doing so, France and the U.S. are trying to appease their respective strong Armenian diasporas, while Russia would like to keep open a conflict-related agenda to be able to exert influence on both Armenia and Azerbaijan. On top of this, both Iran and Russia are concerned about Turkey's growing influence in the region, which, as a matter of fact, is itself the result of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, which has been, in turn, a constant threat to Azerbaijan's national security.

On a personal note, and by way of a conclusion, I wish to indicate that Shusha is the birthplace of my grandfather, who was in the same class at school with Niyazi, the well-known composer and conductor. My great grandfather, who moved the whole family from the city in the turbulent years of 1918-1919, later perished in Siberia, circa 1937-1938—a victim of Stalin's purges. When I stood at Jidir-Duzu in the summer of 2021, I considered how the wheel of history moves between tragedies

and triumphs whilst the belief in justice remains constant throughout all those metamorphoses. Azerbaijan liberated its internationally recognized territory and thus created the conditions for the return of thousands of refugees to their home. Finally, I am in Shusha.

NOTES

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