
Nagorno-Karabakh. Ferrari (Ca' Foscari): "A genocide of Armenian cultural heritage in the territories transferred to Azerbaijan must not be permitted"

Thousands of Armenians are leaving the Nagorno-Karabakh territories which, according to a fixed agenda, will be handed over to Azerbaijan under the Moscow-brokered peace deal signed with Armenia a few days ago. Several of them are setting their homes on fire before leaving. They leave behind also a vast, thousand-year-old cultural and religious heritage. A few days ago the "Supreme Spiritual Council" of the Armenian Apostolic Church spoke out against the risk of this heritage being destroyed. In a Declaration of November 16, the Supreme Council called on governments and competent bodies to "do their utmost to save" churches and monasteries, monuments and historical and cultural museums from "further destruction due to Azerbaijan's anti-Armenian policy." Over the past few days, a group of 42 scholars of Armenian culture, faculty of Universities, Institutes and Academies wrote a Letter to the Italian Government and the Vatican Secretariat of State voicing their concerns. Signatories include Professor **Aldo Ferrari**, from Ca' Foscari University, author, together with Giusto Traina, of the book "*Storia degli Armeni*" (Feltrinelli). "Russian peacekeeping troops have been deployed to protect what is left of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh", the expert points out. *"But unfortunately we know what to expect from Azerbaijanis".*



We know it not in a rhetorical way. Far from wanting to condemn a whole people there is a distinct historical precedent. Regrettably Nagorno-Karabakh has a precedent relating to Nakhichevan. This region that can barely be found on the map is located between Armenia, Persia and Turkey. It was historically and demographically Armenian but it became part of Azerbaijan. The Armenians have since left and the Armenian Christian cultural heritage has been completely annihilated: 89 churches and 10 thousand stone crosses, the famous "khachkar", were destroyed. *Not a trace of the thousand-year-old Armenian presence is left in this region, although there are books, photos, and documentation prior to 1991 that attest to it. Everything has been wiped out now.* As Italian Armenian culture scholars, we fear that this could happen again if Karabakh is transferred to Azerbaijan in its entirety. As scholars, we are concerned that regardless of the political and military outcome of the war, which had clear human and humanitarian consequences, there may be another cultural tragedy of the same proportions. What underlies a Country's strategy to destroy the cultural sites of its enemy? There is a lot to consider in this respect. Azerbaijan lost the war against Armenia in 1994 and now it won. There is therefore a strong feeling of hostility against the victorious enemy, and it retaliated for the defeat by destroying the monuments in Nakhichevan. There is also a more complex issue: while Armenians, Georgians and Persian neighbours have their own distinct and ancient historical and cultural identity, Azerbaijan has a more contemporary cultural history. *When an identity lacks strong foundations, it tends to strengthen what is weak, destroying what is deemed to cause difficulties.* What would Europe lose if the thousand-year-old Armenian presence in this region were wiped out? I will answer this question from a personal perspective. Seeing the remnants of Armenian culture in Turkey or in the Armenian

territories that are now part of Azerbaijan, causes tremendous suffering to a European because it means seeing traces of a thousand-year-old Christian civilization that went completely destroyed, along with the people who had erected it. But this pain would be the same if the cultural and religious heritage of other faiths were targeted. *What happened to the Armenians in Turkey dates back 100 years; what was destroyed in the Nakhichevan, goes back 30 years. We don't want the same thing to happen now in Karabakh.* It is a sad reminder of what happened in other parts of the world, as in the Nineveh Plains, by Daesh. Why is it that often when a people is targeted its artistic and religious heritage is annihilated with them? This is what is known as "cultural genocide." In the ancient Armenian capital of Ani, Turkey, for example, the monuments are preserved but Armenian names are never found in the captions. The historical memory is erased, falsifying reality. In the Nakhichevan region of Azerbaijan, Armenian monuments are never mentioned in tourist guides, thereby denying that there was ever an Armenian presence in these territories. But we have entire libraries that attest this presence, documents and recent photos of churches and cemeteries. Nonetheless, historical, cultural and political falsehood could lead to forget millennia-old artistic, anthropological and religious life, even in a short time. It can happen. You wrote a Letter to the Italian Government and the Vatican Secretariat of State. What do you expect? Azerbaijan has won the war. It got what it wanted. The only thing that can and should be asked is for the Azeri President, Ilham Alyev, to keep the promises made to Russian President Vladimir Putin, namely to safeguard Armenian artistic, cultural and religious heritage. This must be done under the permanent supervision of the Italian and European governments and UNESCO.

M. Chiara Biagioni