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URBICIDE AND DESTRUCTION IN EASTERN EUROPE: WARSAW, MARIUPOL, AND AGHDAM IN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT: The term urbicide is generally understood as “violence against the city” or “destruction of the urban,” where *urbs* means “city” and *cide* refers to the “killing.” This term applies to a deliberate attempt to destroy a city or urban settlement. However, urbicide represents neither a supplement to mass extermination nor collateral to armed intervention, as its purpose is to ruin the city itself. The term was coined in 1963 by Michael Moorcock and has been widely employed to describe urban restructuring, mostly in Western countries. However, scholars began using this term in the context of destruction beginning with the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, especially after the “Siege of Sarajevo.” Besides the Balkan Wars, different types of urbicide have happened in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, including in post-Soviet countries. The present renewed interest in the topic of urbicide is connected with the wars in Syria and Ukraine. This study focused on the first incident of urbicide in modern

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warfare, Warsaw during the Second World War, and two recent cases: Mariupol in Ukraine and Aghdam in Azerbaijan. The author, by comparing different cases, posits that a warring party that embarks on urbicide might pursue different goals—not only to destroy a conflicting party’s defense, but also to erase the city’s cultural attribution as well as to prevent the future rehabilitation and return of the pre-war population.

KEYWORDS: Urbicide, War, Ethnic Conflicts, Eastern Europe, Warfare

INTRODUCTION

Although initially “urbicide” was designed to profile the destruction of a city’s past in terms of profound restructuring, since the 1990s it has been applied mostly to urban warfare. The first decade after the Cold War brought very tragic and destructive wars in the Balkans, and cities such as Sarajevo and Mostar suffered heavy human and material losses that resulted in partial ethnic cleansing. However, Martin Coward ushered in a new understanding of urbicide beyond the meaning of military warfare, underlining that it “*has a meaning of its own*” and that “it appeared that these post-Cold War conflicts targeted the city not as a mechanism for the reduction of the capacity of an enemy to fight, but for its own sake.”¹

Furthermore, it is also crucial to differentiate the terms “urbicide” and “genocide.” Although both expressions are used to describe the commission of violence, the terms differ fundamentally. In genocide, *genos* means nation and *cide* means killing; the main target is to murder a group of people for ethnic, racial, or religious purposes. However, in urbicide, unlike people, buildings that are the symbol of specific or diverse communities are targeted.

Although the present study begins with the destruction of Warsaw during the Second World War, it further delves into other types of urbicide. The civil wars in Chechnya and Syria, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and certain other conflicts have brought other types of destruction and examples of urbicide. The latest war between Russia and Ukraine, with the destruction of Mariupol and other urban settlements, has once again made the topic of urbicide acute.

Martin Coward highlights that *urbicide is actually aimed at shaping identities from heterogeneous to homogeneous ones.*² To support this idea, he mentions the destruction of

¹ Martin Coward, *Urbicide: the politics of urban destruction*. London: Routledge, 2009, pp.36-37.

² Coward, op. cit., pp.5-12

Stari Most in Mostar in 1993 during the Balkan Wars. The spectacular feature of this bridge was that it symbolized the existence of the multicultural identity of Bosnia, where people from different religious and cultural and social backgrounds lived together in harmony. *From the perspective of Martin Coward, the demolition of Stari Most demonstrated that the co-existence of various communities would not be possible anymore.*

Another contributing example is Grozny, the capital of the Chechnya autonomy in Russia, which was destroyed during the Russian army's assault on the city in 2000. However, the destruction of Grozny was mainly aimed at Chechen rebels and can be considered in terms of the *urban warfare tactics employed by Russia to overcome resistance without any consideration for collateral damage.* Furthermore, Russia is employing the same tactic in the ongoing war against Ukraine.³ Konstantyn and Oleksii Mezentsev, in the article "War and the city: Lessons from urbicide in Ukraine," examine various types of urbicide with a focus on "place annihilation," which is the term used to describe the complete destruction of cities during the Second World War. In this, the opposing army aims to damage all means of livelihood; this also includes the environment. This kind of urbicide, which is also called "extreme urbicide," intends the demolition of national identity.⁴ The Mezentsevs then emphasize "construction wars" in reference to the type of urbicide that happened after the Second World War with the aim of annihilating the architectural landscape of the urban settlement. What was committed by the Soviets in Afghanistan was known as "rubbleization," a mixture of the aforementioned forms. In this regard, the main aim of the adversary party is to break the resistance of the local population, especially people from differing cultural, ethnic, and political backgrounds.

A slightly different type of urbicide was employed in the Syrian Civil War when cities were bombed just to impose a feeling of hopelessness on people.⁵ There is a much worse case of rubbleization when the opposing army targets specific buildings which belong to certain religious, national, or cultural groups. In a similar vein, there is also a special type of urbicide that is called "warchitecture," meaning the destruction of the architectural landscape.⁶ In this

³ K. Mezentsev and O. Mezentsev, *War and the city: Lessons from urbicide in Ukraine*, "Czasopismo Geograficzne", vol. 93, no. 3, 2023, pp. 495–521.

⁴ N. Abujidi, *Urbicide in Palestine: Spaces of oppression and resilience*, London: Routledge, 2014.

⁵ A. Shakar and R. Templer, *Urbicide or an elegy for Aleppo*, "Tvergastein Interdisciplinary Journal of the Environment", August 2016, pp. 108-119.

⁶ Mezentsev and Mezentsev, op. cit., p.499

case, the main objective is not to destroy the whole city, but rather those places having particular importance for the identity targeted by the enemy.

According to Nurhan Abujidi, there are two types of assaults: direct, when the city is deliberately attacked, and indirect, when the process happens less visibly and more gradually. He also makes a distinction between “construction” and “control” types of indirect urbicide. In the construction type, people who used to live in the destroyed cities are moved to temporary camps that possess no historical or cultural connection with the local population’s historical background. The underlying factor here is to make people forget their identity. On the other hand, in indirect control urbicide, the city is divided into parts such that the connection among citizens is weakened, or even lost, and the mobility of residents is controlled by the opponent army.

Bruce Stanley, on the other hand, maintains that urbicide has two forms: “siege” and “direct occupation.”⁷ In the former, the city is encircled by the enemy’s army, which runs most of the utilities and infuses fear in the people. A significant example of this is Aleppo, where the siege lasted years. Guistina Selvelli refers to the sieges of Leningrad (1941–1944) and Sarajevo (1992–1996) as the most painful cases in human history. She claims that, by besieging the city, the warring party not only controls the region, but also hinders the development of the city.⁸ In Leningrad’s case, two places—the Catherina and Peterhof palaces—that manifest the historical heritage of the nation were destroyed, and culturally important items were stolen by the Nazis. Similarly, during the siege of Sarajevo, the national library was set on fire to erase the urban memory.

Aghdam and several cities in Azerbaijan that were under Armenian occupation from 1993 to 2020 are examples of complete urban destruction, which happened after the end of armed hostilities. The occupational forces had two motives: the erasure of the ethnic and cultural attributions of the places, and the prevention of the return of the pre-war population in the future.

Urbicide is an important subject of study that re-emerged during the last decade of the twentieth century due to the increased number of conflicts, especially in post-Cold War Europe.

⁷ B. Stanley. *The city-logic of resistance: subverting urbicide in the Middle East city*, “Journal of Peacebuilding and Development”, vol. 12, no. 3, 2017, pp. 10–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1348251>.

⁸ G. Selvelli. “The siege and urbicide of Leningrad and Sarajevo: the testimonies from Lidiya Ginzburg and Dževad Karahasan”. *Konteksti 2015 Conference Proceedings*, 2015, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/53186398.pdf>

Both ethnic and ethno-nationalist conflicts, including in the former territories of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, shed light on the urbicide context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, the qualitative method has been implemented to analyze the urbicide concept. Taking into account the international experience of urban destruction, including a comprehensive analysis of the cases of Warsaw, Sarajevo, and Aleppo, the focus is on a less known case—the applicability of urbicide to Aghdam city in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. In order to compare these cities, the study proceeds using a combination of primary and secondary data with the aim of incorporating both a theoretical understanding of the context and various opinions.

Different authors have put forward certain criteria for urbicide to determine whether a particular city has been exposed to it or not. To begin with, Martin Coward suggests that the starting point of urbicide is deliberate action.⁹ He states that the term urbicide can be applied if there is deliberate destruction of the urban structure. The implication is that Coward would not accept the destruction of a city as urbicide if its infrastructure were damaged without intention, as a result of collateral damage. Deliberate action is a crucial point from an international humanitarian law perspective, as Article 48 of Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions states that only military objects should be targeted during an armed conflict. Andrea Pavoni and Simone Tulumello have a similar criterion for urbicide; however, they associate deliberate action with signs of criminal intent in the city's destruction, which essentially means violation of humanitarian law.¹⁰

Coward's second criterion is the relationship of urbicide with genocide.¹¹ The civilian population is massacred as a continuation of urbicide, and public and residential objects are destroyed so that members of that ethnic group are unable to resettle in the city. Martin Coward, by mentioning genocide, does not imply only the killing of people, but also ethnic cleansing by forcing residents to move from the targeted city. Two key words he uses in his analysis of urbicide are heterogeneity and homogeneity; in most cases, the plan of the

⁹ Coward, Preface in *Urbicide*.

¹⁰ A. Pavoni and S. Tulumello, *What is urban violence? "Progress in Human Geography"*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2020, pp. 49–76.

¹¹ Coward, *Urbicide*, p.15

aggressor is to establish homogeneity in one particular area at the expense of dismantling heterogeneity. Thus, according to Martin Coward, urbicide mainly occurs in cities where one can observe settlement of people from different cultures and ethnicities.

Coward further highlights the elimination of a city's culturally and historically important infrastructure. The ethnic cleansing or destruction of residential areas is not sufficient to achieve the goal of the aggressors; they also have to erase the memory of a nation. They do so by destroying monuments, religious buildings, state archives, and museums. Cultural genocide is a way to achieve a homogenous ethnic identity in the city and prevent future generations of ethnically cleansed people from having claims over the destroyed city. This is important to understanding the destruction that happened in many Azerbaijani cities during the Armenian occupation.

Bruce Stanley came up with a distinctive approach to the concept of urbicide.¹² He states that urbicide is a strategic and political issue rather than an issue of identity and ethnicity. He posits that the city being exposed to destruction is strategically selected to damage the state authority no matter which ethnic group resides in that city. In particular, if a city is destroyed by non-state actors, such as terror groups or other illegal organizations, ethnic cleansing is not a priority; deliberate action, killing people, and destroying infrastructure are still there, but the purpose is weakening state authority over a strategic city. So, the criterion of urbicide for Bruce Stanley is associated with the strategic importance of a city for the state. In this approach, the main motives for destruction are purely military, not ideological, unlike Martin Coward's criteria.

The problem with defining criteria for urbicide seems to be a lack of general study in the literature. Authors analyze urbicide cases in different regions with distinctly different criteria. For instance, Martin Coward investigated urbicide in Bosnia, whereas Bruce Stanley studied the Middle East. However, the common denominators of urbicide in the academic literature are deliberate action, killing people, and destroying cultural heritage, whether the purpose is ideological or military-political.

¹² Stanley, *op. cit.*

WARSAW

The first and most prominent example of urbicide in modern history is considered to be the destruction of the city of Warsaw during World War Two by the Nazis. What makes this case foremost is that the whole process of destruction matches the criteria for urbicide very well. Before the invasion of Poland in 1939, the Nazis had a specific “Pabst Plan” to completely destroy the Polish capital and replace it with a new German city.¹³ According to the plan, the Nazi authorities wanted to remove the Polish population and remake the city as a German settlement. There was clear and well-documented intent to reshape the city.

The military obliteration of the city commenced in September 1939 through bombing. German forces entered the city on October 1, and during the five years of occupation the city was gradually destroyed. Destruction of the city was implemented systematically through legal decrees.¹⁴ The initial plan was to destroy historical monuments, as a result of which twelve percent of the city was ruined during the first days of invasion, and the reconstruction process was legally banned by a Nazi decree. However, the Nazi idea of establishing a new German city did not happen due to developments in the war; therefore the German forces replaced their plan for the immediate demolition of Warsaw with one of gradual destruction.¹⁵ From 1939 to 1944, sixty percent of the population were killed, civilian buildings were bombed, and many people were deported from the capital. It is worth noting that the massive annihilation of Warsaw is associated with the Warsaw Uprising of August 1, 1944. This date marks the start of the most brutal stage of the obliteration of the city. Within months, cultural and historical heritage, especially the Old Town, and remaining residential buildings were almost totally destroyed, and eighty five percent of the city had been wiped out by January 1945.¹⁶ Heinrich Himmler, one of the main Nazi ideologues, stated that Warsaw should be destroyed completely to finalize the Polish issue for future generations of Germans.¹⁷ As is obvious from this statement, the whole process of urbicide in Warsaw included ethnic and cultural destruction.

¹³ Sy History Channel, *The destruction of Warsaw: the Nazi plan to obliterate a city*, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://www.history.co.uk/article/the-destruction-of-warsaw-the-nazi-plan-to-obliterate-a-city>

¹⁴ J. Elżanowski, *Manufacturing ruins: architecture and representation in post-catastrophic Warsaw*, “The Journal of Architecture”, vol. 23, no. 5, 2018, pp. 740–755, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2018.1495912>.

¹⁵ K. Utracka, *Warszawa – miasto, którego już nie ma*, “The Warsaw Institute Review”, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.review/pl/numer-1-2019/warszawa-miasto-ktorego-juz-nie-ma/>

¹⁶ H. Kalman, *Destruction, mitigation, and reconciliation of cultural heritage*, “International Journal of Heritage Studies”, vol. 23, no. 6, 2017, pp. 538-555, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1289475>.

¹⁷ Utracka, op. cit.

One can clearly observe the signs of ethnic cleansing while analyzing what happened in Warsaw during the Second World War. The hostility of Nazi ideology towards both the Jewish and Polish peoples was obvious, though the former were completely eliminated and the latter relatively spared. In September 1939, 16,000 people became victims of Nazi occupation and not only residents of the city center but also people in the suburbs of the capital were deliberately targeted. In the ruthless days of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, the Nazis murdered 50,000 people, including many children, within a few days.¹⁸ The crimes committed by the Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising were clear indicators of ethnic cleansing. Additionally, the acts of Nazi Germany had a psychological impact; after the liberation of Warsaw by the Allies, most people who had taken the chance to flee the Nazi violence did not want to return to Warsaw as they had psychological issues. In the events of both 1939 and 1944, the Nazis pursued the goals of physical destruction and population expulsion. By considering these facts, the linkage between urbicide and ethnic cleansing becomes apparent. In this regard, Katarzyna Utracka claims that the ideological hostility of the Nazis to the Polish ethnic identity was the main motivation for the destruction of Warsaw as the capital of the Polish nation.¹⁹

Central Warsaw, known as the Old Town, was the first target of Nazi bombing in 1939 when the Royal Castle was severely damaged. The Old Town of Warsaw was a symbol of Polish historical integrity and identity. Thus, the obliteration of this part of the city was equated to the loss of Polish identity, and important historical monuments, such as the city's Gothic, Mannerist Jesuit, and Holy Cross churches were destroyed. Moreover, cultural heritage including the National Theater, Warsaw Philharmonic, and Bruhl and Saxon palaces were deliberately dismantled during the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Along with monuments, the National Library and national archives were set alight, and the remaining part of the Royal Castle was dynamited during the uprising. Only the buildings that were used by the German military authorities remained untouched. Some historical monuments, such as the Copper-Roof Palace, the National Museum, and the Belweder Palace were included in the destruction plans of the Nazis but, due to time constraints, they managed to survive the Nazi occupation.

When UNESCO recognized the Old Town of Warsaw as a World Heritage Site, it indicated that Warsaw was deliberately annihilated, and the Old Town in particular was subject to the

¹⁸ Warsaw Institute, *Warsaw – the City that is No More*, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/warsaw-city-no/>

¹⁹ Utracka, op. cit.

“special attention” of the Nazis, who set out to obliterate the traditions of statehood, culture, and identity of the Polish people.²⁰ Warsaw can be considered the first case of urbicide during modern warfare and its destruction in two phases—in 1939 and 1944—clearly manifests that the goals of Nazi Germany went beyond military necessity.

MARIUPOL

The Russian invasion of Ukraine produced one of the worst examples of destruction in Europe since the end of the Second World War, with a larger number of human casualties than in the Balkan wars. The Russian bombardment of cities, industrial complexes, and energy infrastructure had a devastating effect. The tactics the Russian army employed were similar to those used during the sieges of Grozny and Aleppo. Unable to achieve a quick and easy defeat of the Ukrainian army, Russian military forces incrementally destroyed urban settlements. Outstanding among this destruction was that of the city of Mariupol, a strategic location on the land connection between Russia and occupied Crimea. As a result of the occupation of Mariupol, Russia established an uninterrupted land route from Russian proper to Crimea in 2022.

The Mariupol urbicide encompasses two forms: military warfare and cultural destruction. In many other cities in Ukraine, Russia targeted several types of structures—administrative buildings, communications and energy infrastructure, and emergency services.²¹ However, in cities like Kharkiv and Ivankiv, culturally significant buildings such as museums had already been destroyed. In Mariupol, ninety percent of the urban area was razed to the ground. In the view of Aaron Clements-Hunt, Russia’s urbicide “should be seen as performative violence, intended to send a clear message to Ukraine and its international partners. Mariupol is a warning that can be weaponized by Russia in future coercive negotiations.”²²

There is another important aspect of urbicide in Mariupol. The Russian war against Ukraine had several pretexts, including the threat of NATO expansion, the suppression of Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, and the rise of Nazism. At the core of the campaign, there is a belief among Russian nationalists that Ukraine is historical Russian territory and Ukrainians do

²⁰ Kalman, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

²¹ A. S. M. Compagnoni, *Urbicide and the Russian-Ukrainian war*, “Wavel Room”, April 5, 2023, <https://wavelroom.com/2023/04/05/urbicide-russian-ukrainian-war/>

²² A. Clements-Hunt, *Russia’s campaign of urbicide in Ukraine*, “New Line Institute”, accessed 12 September 2023, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/rules-based-international-order/russias-campaign-of-urbicide-in-ukraine/>

not represent a separate nation, but rather are a byproduct of Soviet nationalities policies.²³ Mariupol, along with other southern cities, is considered by Russian nationalists as part of “*Novorossiya*” (New Russia), a term used in the Russian Empire from the 18th century to describe those areas conquered during a series of wars. It received a new meaning after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 as Russia tried to regain control over territories lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. According to Konstantyn and Oleksii Mezentsev, the destruction of Ukrainian cities had the goal of erasing the development that had taken place after Ukraine gained independence.²⁴

Aaron Clements-Hunt believes that “no other state since the allied bombing campaigns of WWII has so consistently and systematically pursued urbicide as a central component of its military operations.” The Russian military machine had already developed this strategy in Afghanistan, and it was successfully tested in Chechnya, later in Syria, and finally in Ukraine. While certain elements of destruction can be attributed to military action or, more precisely, urban warfare, the aerial attack on the Mariupol Theatre on March 16, 2022, and the missile attack on Vinnytsia city center on July 14, 2022—locations with no military significance and devoid of military installations—manifest the deliberate targeting of identity-related sites. After the occupation of Mariupol, the Russian authorities declared their goal of rebuilding the city; however, the experience of other settlements in occupied Eastern Ukraine shows that the restructuring of the city will have the aim of its de-Ukrainization. This trend has been present in the Russian approach since 2014.²⁵

AGHDAM

Aghdam (or Agdam) is a case of urbicide that is relatively less known in the international arena as compared to other cities. However, the destruction gained notoriety when the city was dubbed the “Hiroshima of the Caucasus.”²⁶

The city of Aghdam, one of the historically important regional centers in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, was occupied by Armenian armed forces in July 1993 in the course of the

²³ O. Khromeychuk, *Putin says Ukraine doesn't exist. That's why he's trying to destroy it*, “New York Times”, November 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/opinion/ukraine-war-national-identity.html>

²⁴ Mezentsev and Mezentsev, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

²⁵ M. Gentile. *Pax McDonaldica before the storm: From geopolitical fault-line to urbicide in Mariupol, Ukraine*, “Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers”, no. 48, 2023, pp. 665– 670.

²⁶ T. de Waal, “Twitter”, November 18, 2020, https://twitter.com/Tom_deWaal/status/1329001952311717890

war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The war, dubbed the First Karabakh War (1992–1994), was a result of a conflict that emerged in 1987–1988 as Armenian nationalists began a movement aimed at unification (*miatsum* in Armenian) of the then Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomy of Soviet Azerbaijan with Soviet Armenia. As Armenians gained control over the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomy after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, they expanded military operations beyond the former autonomy, and in 1993 occupied the seven adjacent regions of Azerbaijan, including Aghdam.²⁷ The entire population of Aghdam and other settlements that fell under Armenian occupation in 1993 was expelled, and the area was gradually razed to the ground.

Armenians initially claimed that Aghdam was a buffer zone or security belt that they intended to exchange for Azerbaijan's acceptance of the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁸ International mediation under the auspices of OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, focused on a peace plan, the so-called Madrid Principles, that stipulated the return of Aghdam and other regions outside of the former Nagorno-Karabakh autonomy to Azerbaijan's control and a future arrangement for the interim and final status of Nagorno-Karabakh to be determined through an expression of will. Negotiations over the implementation of those principles had never yielded any positive result, and in 2020 Azerbaijan liberated its occupied territories.

Before that, in 2010, the Armenians had renamed the city "Akna" and claimed that the entire occupied area was a part of Armenia's historical lands and should constitute a territory called the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" or "Artsakh."²⁹

Immediately after the occupation in 1993, the whole area was looted and burned. When locals and international journalists visited the city after the occupation, they called it the "Hiroshima of the Caucasus"³⁰ to highlight the massive extent of destruction. American diplomat Carey Cavanaugh termed it "the largest Home Depot on the planet."³¹ An OSCE Fact-

²⁷ United Nations Security Council, resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165604?ln=en>

²⁸ M. Episkopos, *Nagorno-Karabakh and fresh scars of war*, "National Interest", December 20, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/nagorno-karabakh-and-fresh-scars-war-174690>

²⁹ Azernews, *Armenian separatists rename Azeri town*, "Azernews.az", November 3, 2010, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/26472.html>

³⁰ L. Musayelyan, *Life among ruins of Caucasus Hiroshima*, "The Institute of War and Peace Reporting", April 26, 2011, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/life-among-ruins-caucasus-hiroshima>

³¹ Michael Wines, *Trying to tell a Truce from a War*, "New York Times", May 27, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/27/world/trying-to-tell-a-truce-from-a-war.html>

Finding Mission that visited Aghdam in 2005 reported that the entire city was “in complete ruins with the exception of the mosque in the center.”³² The mosque, desecrated, was kept for military purposes as it served as an observation point.³³

Aghdam, Jabrayil, Fizuli, and many other Azerbaijani settlements faced a similar fate. Visiting them was described by a New York Times journalist as “a journey into a devastated wasteland reminiscent of a World War I battlefield.”³⁴ Although there have been appeals to UNESCO on many occasions, the organization has failed to send a mission to the Karabakh region to investigate the situation during the Armenian occupation.

Before the occupation, Karabakh and the seven adjacent regions were home to 706 historic and cultural monuments: 11 monuments of global importance (6 of them architectural and 5 archaeological), 240 of state importance (119 architectural and 121 archeological), and 455 of local importance (393 architectural, 22 archaeological, 23 parks and memorial monuments, and 17 decorative artworks). Twenty-two museums containing more than 100,000 artifacts, 927 libraries possessing 4.6 million books, 85 music schools, 4 theaters, 2 concert halls, 4 art galleries, and 808 recreational venues were destroyed as a result of the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent regions.³⁵

Aghdam, along with many other settlements, faced both ethnic cleansing and physical destruction—both markers of urbicide. Furthermore, the Armenian occupying authorities gradually destroyed the historical heritage and culturally significant buildings in an attempt to commit “warchitecture,” to employ a term used for the devastation of Sarajevo. Aghdam State Drama Theater, Shahbulag Castle, Aghdam Bread Museum, Aghdam History-Ethnography Museum, and many other culturally important buildings were destroyed. In Sarajevo, a similar fate was experienced by the Oriental Institute, Bey’s Mosque, the Olympic Games Museum, and the National Museum of Bosnia. The high number of culturally significant buildings the

³² OSCE, “Fact finding mission to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh”, February 28, 2005, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/dsca20050413_08/dsca20050413_08en.pdf

³³ C. Gall and A. Troianovski, *After Nagorno-Karabakh War, trauma, tragedy and devastation*, “The New York Times”, December 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan.html>

³⁴ Gall and Troianovski, op. cit.

³⁵ AIR Center, *Armenia’s Appropriation of Azerbaijan Cultural and Historic Heritage*, July 2021, <https://aircenter.az/uploads/files/Cultural%20Appropriation.pdf>

Armenians destroyed attests to the fact that this campaign was aimed at erasure of the Azerbaijani identity of the region.

These statistics also help us establish the third criterion of urbicide, that is, erasing a city's identity to prevent any potential return of the displaced population. According to Martin Coward, the method is the direct destruction of identity embodied in architecture and public spaces, and that is greatly applicable to Karabakh.³⁶ Even though these buildings were not of any military importance, their deliberate destruction erodes the historical, symbolic, cultural, and national values attached to those artifacts.³⁷ The destruction of a site of national or religious importance is not simply an attack on cultural heritage, but rather an act of destruction of the social groups settled on that territory. These groups recognize themselves in those cultural and religious sites, since they represent their identity and essence.³⁸

As defined above, the main objective of conducting urbicide is to ruin a city for the implementation of distinct purposes beyond military necessities. In fact, the occupation of Aghdam in July 1993 happened without large-scale military action. The Azerbaijani army essentially retreated without significantly challenging the Armenian armed forces, as in summer 1993 the domestic political situation was on the brink of civil war, and in June Azerbaijan's president Abulfaz Elchibey was overthrown by rebel colonel Suret Huseynov, who controlled most of the armed forces in Karabakh. The destruction of Aghdam occurred with a clear intent if analyzed in terms of the two criteria offered by Martin Coward: pursuing a deliberate purpose and erasing the history of the city.

There is another reason for the massive scale of destruction. As mentioned above, the Armenian authorities planned to create a security belt comprising Aghdam and other settlements that were close to the line of contact with the Azerbaijani armed forces with the idea of a possible land swap for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia thought that the massive destruction would create an obstacle to the return of Azerbaijanis in the future. The UNHCR estimated that the number of internally displaced people who were forcibly evicted from settlements in Karabakh and the seven adjacent regions as a result of the occupation of

³⁶ Coward, *Urbicide*, 2009.

³⁷ R. Bevan, *The destruction of memory: architecture at war*, The University Chicago Press, 2006.

³⁸ F. Botti and C. Bianchi, *Cultural heritage and religious phenomenon between urbicide and cancel culture: the other side of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict*, "Religions", vol. 14, no. 4, 2023, p. 535, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040535>

Azerbaijan's territories reached 600,000.³⁹ According to the last Soviet census in 1989, the Aghdam region had a population of 131,293, of whom 28,000 lived in the city of Aghdam and more than 103,000 in surrounding villages and other rural settlements. Now, the whole area is heavily contaminated by land mines, and it will take a few decades to completely clear the area.⁴⁰

Another aspect of urbicide is concerned with generating psychological effect. The motive of infusing fear during assaults can be clearly seen in the events of the past three decades in cities such as Grozny, Aleppo, and Mariupol. For many years, the ruin of Aghdam symbolized hopelessness and the impossibility of the return of the population.⁴¹ However, once the city was liberated, the government of Azerbaijan embarked on a large-scale reconstruction project.

CONCLUSION

The current paper has attempted to contextualize urbicide as a means of physical and cultural destruction outside of military necessity. Through a review of the limited literature, I posit that the incidence of urbicide is growing and the subject requires further assessment, especially in terms of strategies for its prevention and the rehabilitation of urban settlements after the end of armed conflicts. The first case of modern urbicide, Warsaw in the Second World War, signifies the three criteria of urbicide: intentional physical destruction outside of collateral damage, displacement of the population, and annihilation of historically and culturally significant architecture. It should be highlighted that Martin Coward's masterpiece, *Urbicide: The politics of urban destruction*, was profoundly useful in elucidating further essential criteria for urbicide: deliberate action against the city, and the destruction of historical and cultural buildings. Another criterion for urbicide rests on Bruce Stanley's idea of intended damage to cities that have profound importance for the state.

After defining the criteria, urbicide in Warsaw and Mariupol was discussed to reveal the similarities and differences between them and with a case in Karabakh, namely Aghdam.

³⁹ UNHCR, Azerbaijan: analysis of gaps in the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs), October 2009, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/azerbaijan-analysis-gaps-protection-internally-displaced-persons-idps>

⁴⁰ M. Van lange, Analysis: Landmine contamination in Azerbaijan's Aghdam region prevents tens of thousands of displaced persons from returning to their homes, Commonsense.eu, May 30, 2023, <https://www.commonspace.eu/analysis/analysis-landmine-contamination-azerbaijans-aghdam-region-prevents-tens-thousands>

⁴¹ D. Richter, *Ghosts of Agdam*, "Ex Utopia", May 30, 2018, <https://www.exutopia.com/exclusion-zone/ghosts-of-agdam/>

Additional cases such as Sarajevo, Mostar, Grozny, and Aleppo were invoked for a more comprehensive overview. It was shown that modern warfare adds a psychological dimension of urbicide—to infuse fear, as was the case in Aleppo in Mariupol. The case of Aghdam perfectly fits with all three major markers of urbicide, and with a new significant element—preventing the return of the prewar population to the destroyed city.

Based on the comparative analysis, the primary similarity is that it is possible to observe in all three cases in the current study the intended destruction of cultural and historical buildings, accompanied by population displacement or even ethnic cleansing.

Moreover, one of the characteristics of urbicide is the infliction of emotional damage on people. In Aleppo and Karabakh, locals were exposed to psychological trauma when their homes were being destroyed. The fact that the destruction of Warsaw and Aghdam happened gradually during the period of occupation manifests criminal intent and planning.

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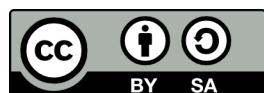
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