

Shushi – A tragic destiny

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Although some authors such as Ch. Walker and A. Maghalyan speak of the presence of an Armenian fortress since the Middle Ages, most sources date Shushi's establishment to the 1750s. According to the historian Mirza Javanshir, who wrote a history of Karabakh (*Tarikh-e Qarabagh*) in Persian in the mid-nineteenth century, the fortress of Shushi was built by Panah Ali, head of the Turkic Javanshir tribe and founder of the Karabakh Khanate. However, he had the decisive support of the Armenian melik Shahnazar of Varanda, who was on bad terms with the other meliks in the region. This version is shared by the Armenian author Raffi (1831–1881), who in his history of the meliks of Karabakh wrote: “Melik-Shahnazar laid with his own hand the first stone of what would become a cemetery, for him and for all the melikdoms of Karabakh...[...].” (Raffi 1987, 454; Raffi 2008, 72).

In fact, the foundation of the Shushi fortress and the birth of the Karabakh Khanate determined the decline of the Armenian *meliks*, who in the following decades were subjugated by Panah Khan and his son Ibrahim Khan. The Armenian population of the region then experienced a sharp decline, but the conquest by the Russian Empire significantly changed the situation. In particular, during the nineteenth century Shushi lost its importance as a fortress and became a rapidly expanding city, inhabited by both Armenians and Azeris, then called Tatars. According to the Russian census of 1822, 765 Tatar and 326 Armenian families lived in Shushi. During the 19th century this demographic situation changed to the advantage of the Armenians, who in 1897 constituted the majority of the approximately 26,000 inhabitants of the city: 55.7% compared to 41.6% of the Tatars and 1.4% of the Russians. Unlike Tiflis, where numerous populations coexisted, Shushi was therefore essentially divided in half between Armenians and Azeris (Tatars).

Until the First World War, Shushi played a fundamental role in Armenian cultural life in the Caucasus, livelier than Yerevan, second only to Tiflis in terms of the number of schools and printing houses. In this period 10 schools were opened in Shushi, also by the Swiss missionaries of the Basel Evangelical Association, that founded the first printing press in the region in 1828. More than a dozen of newspapers and journals appeared in the city, such as the *Ethnographic Journal* published by Yervant Lalayan's. Among the most relevant Armenian figures born in Shushi should be remembered the general Ivan Lazarev (1820–1879), the novelist Murats'an (1858–1908), the historian Leo (1860–1932), and the painter Step'an Aghajanian (1863–1940). The Cathedral of Our Savior (built between 1868 and 1887, usually called Ghazanch'ets'ots') and the Khandamiriant's Theatre are among the most relevant monuments of this era of strong cultural development of the Armenian community. At the same time it should be remembered that Shushi (Shusha in Turkish) is considered one of the leading centers of the Azerbaijani culture, particularly renowned for its traditional genre of vocal and instrumental art, the mugham. In Shushi also lived Molla Panah Vagif, vizier of the Karabakh khanate and prominent poet, Khurshidbanu Natavan, Azerbaijan's most famous woman poet, the composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov and other important representative of the Azerbaijani culture.

During the 19th century Armenians and Tatars coexisted peacefully in Shushi, but this city was involved in the bloody conflict of 1905, the so-called Armenian-Tatar war, which broke out during

the First Russian Revolution. The situation worsened after the end of the Russian Empire, with the establishment of the two independent Republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan, which claimed the ethnically mixed territories of Zangezur, Nakhichevan and Karabakh. The conflicts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis reached their peak in March 1920, when the local Armenian community was massacred, and the survivors abandoned the city. The Azerbaijani component also suffered considerably and very little remained of the beautiful city which had experienced such notable development in the Tsarist time. In 1926 the Soviet census counted only 93 Armenians, 4900 Azeris and 9 Russians. Ten years after the massacre, the Russian poet Osip Mandelshtam and his wife visited Shushi. Nadezhda Mandelshtam gave awful information about the massacre and the dire impressions received from Shushi were also reflected in the poem “Coachman” written by Osip Mandelshtam.

After this pogrom Shushi was reduced to a small provincial city. Its population afterward progressively dropped year by year, reaching 5,104 by 1926, but Armenians did not return for a long time. It was not until the 1960s that the Armenian quarter began to be rebuilt. According to the population census in 1979, in Shushi lived only 9,216 Armenians, the 13.1% of the population.

Following the capture of Shushi by the Armenian forces in 1992, the Azerbaijani population of the town, consisting of 15,000 people, was killed or expelled. In this period the population consisted of over 4,000 Armenians, mainly refugees from Baku and other parts of Karabakh and Azerbaijan. In the following years the city, largely destroyed during the war, was partially rebuilt. In this period the Savior (Ghazanch‘ets‘ots‘) Cathedral and the Green Church (Kanach‘ Zham) were restored, as were the main mosques and other historic buildings, but overall the city remained largely depopulated and desolate. Shushi’s Armenians fled shortly before the conquest of the city by Azerbaijani forces during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. No Armenians live in present day Shusha, which is being repopulated by the Azeris and is undergoing monumental reconstruction work. This city has in fact become an essential element of the nationalist narrative of Azerbaijan, which insists on its central role in national culture and at the same time excludes the role of Armenians within it. Besides, in the last years the Azerbaijani authorities have vandalized Armenian cultural landmarks of Shushi, including Ghazanch‘ets‘ots‘ Cathedral and Kanach‘ Zham church, as supported by reports from [CaucasusHeritageWatch](#). As a matter of fact, the Armenian presence in this city seems destined to disappear completely.

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