

Aggressor destroys cultural heritage in Crimea

Start of the "restoration" of the Khan's palace

📍 133 Richna str., Bakhchysaray, Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine

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In addition to political and legal issues, temporary occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation raised a number of specific issues, including the protection of the cultural heritage sites. Experts keep records of violations of international humanitarian law committed by the occupation authorities in this area. A glaring example is the so-called "restoration" going on in the Khan's palace in Bakhchysaray and threatening to destroy the authenticity of the historical site.

The ensemble of the Khan's Palace comprises 19 objects:

- Main building (early 16th - 18th centuries)
- Harem (18th century)
- Palatine building (18th century)
- Khan's kitchen (18th century)
- Secret building (18th - 19th centuries)
- Library building (19th century)
- Falcon tower (18th century)
- Khan's mosque (16th - 18th centuries)
- South Dürbe and North Dürbe tombs (17th century)
- Tomb rotunda (18th century)
- Embankment with three bridges (16th century)
- Gardens and park structures (18th - 19th centuries, lost)
- Pool courtyard (with a cascading fountain)

- Dilâra Bikeç Dürbesi (the tomb, 1764)
- Sari-Guzel bath (1533)
- Mezarlık, the palace cemetery (16th - 18th centuries)

- Main palace square with three fountains
- Garden of the Embassy Courtyard (with two fountains)
- Catherine's Mile (1787)

Palace in the history and memory of the Crimean Tatar people

The Palace of the Crimean Khans (hereinafter - the Khan's Palace) (photo 3) was the main residence of the rulers of the Crimean Khanate (from the middle of the 15th to the end of the 18th century), the administrative and political center of this state from the first third of the 16th century. It is located in the valley of the river Churuk-Su in the city of Bakhchysaray, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The palace is on the balance sheet of the Crimean Republican Institution Bakhchysaray Historical and Cultural Reserve (until 01/01/2015). This is the only work of the Crimean Tatar palace architecture in the world and the only surviving palace of the Giray dynasty, the descendants of Genghis Khan.

Terms
Crimean Khanate

The construction of the Palace dates back to 1532–1533. Khan Sahib I Giray remained in memory not only as the ruler of Kazan (where, in the meantime, he organized resistance to Moscow's attempts to seize Kazan) and the Crimean Khanates, but also as a great reformer and founder of the new capital of the Crimean Khanate and builder of the Bakhchysaray Palace.

The oldest objects are the Portal of Aleviz or Demir Qapi (the Iron Portal), created in 1503 by the famous Italian master Alvise Lamberti da Montagnana. (photo 4), the Sari-Guzel baths (1533) and the Khan Mosque (1532). Initially, the mosque was a domed structure, but after the fire of 1736 set up by order of the Russian Field Marshal Burkhard Christoph von Münnich, the mosque was badly damaged and was later rebuilt. The roof of the mosque became hipped, covered with tiles and crowned with a spire (photo 5).

After the deportation of 1944, the Soviet government tried to destroy all references to the Crimean Tatars: the Soviet authorities launched an extensive renaming campaign on the peninsula eliminating Crimean Tatar toponyms, destroyed the Crimean Tatar monuments, burned manuscripts and books, and set up cinemas and shops in mosques. Bakhchysaray Khan Palace miraculously survived this massive cultural purge, although it was for the Crimean Tatars not only a symbol of the birth and development of their statehood in this territory, but also of the return and rebirth in their native land. This historical monument held similar essential significance also in earlier periods. It is no coincidence that it was the Khan's palace that was chosen as the venue for the first Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People on November 26 (December 9 by Gregorian calendar) 1917. But 100 years after this landmark event, the unique monumental ensemble that belongs to the history of all of Europe is falling victim to the Russian aggression. The work began from the oldest object of the ensemble – the Big Khan Mosque. The methods used by the occupation authorities of Crimea for this kind of "restoration" provoked the outrage of Crimean activists and later would become the subject of relevant scathing reports of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.





Crimea remembers. The Khan's Palace in Bakhchysaray.

Palace under the occupation: restoration or destruction of a symbol

Since 01/01/2015, the palace has been under the management of a newly created legal entity – the so-called State budgetary "Institution of the Republic of Crimea Bakhchysaray Historical, Cultural and Archaeological Museum and Reserve".

The permit for the so-called restoration was issued on 07/05/2017 (see the document in attachment)

In October 2017, work began on the territory of the palace, which the Russian sources refer to in a number of ways: "priority emergency response", "repair and restoration" or "reconstruction".

The Big Khan Mosque undoubtedly required restoration, which had to not only secure the appearance of the monument but also preserve its authenticity.

UkrNDIprojectrestavratsia, the institute that was preparing the mosque restoration project back in 2014, came to the following conclusions:

- out of 22 roof beams (9.5 m long), 3 were due for replacement and one for restoration, 4 more beams due for additional reinforcement with angle bars on top; and 1 cross beam (9.5 m long) due for replacement;
- out of 82 floor beams (6.5 m long), 3 were due for replacement, 4 beams due for restoration, and 6 beams were due for reinforcement with angle bars.

These findings were confirmed during examination of the ceiling in 2015 and during the installation works on a temporary support structure over the entrance to the mosque from the side of the Churuk-Su river.

However, the occupants decided to dismantle and rebuild the roof and to apply regular construction norms to the cultural heritage site right at the planning stage.

Instead of restoring the individual elements of the historic roof of the mosque, a decision was made to dismantle the roof completely (photo 6). This was done not by restoration professionals but by regular builders (photo 7) who used heavy equipment (photo 8) and jackhammers, causing vibrations and extensive damage to the mosque walls (photo 9). The study of the dismantled elements of the roof beam system, showed that there was no need for complete dismantling, because almost 95% of the system was in sound condition (photo 10).

The construction operator would later decide to use modern building materials and technologies, which is unacceptable in cultural heritage sites. Most importantly, composite materials were used for beam structures and concrete mortars with metal reinforcement (photo 11 photo 12). The ancient handicraft barrel tiles (traditionally known as "keramet" or "tatarka") were replaced by the Spanish factory-made monk and nun tiles in imitation of antiquity. Clay-base tiling technique was replaced with modern fasteners (see the expert opinion of the Center for Monument Studies)

The contractor made no structural analysis for the additional load on the walls caused by the new structures (new beam system, reinforced concrete horizontal bond beam, etc.). Structural analysis of this factor is an absolute must for the operator preparing a restoration project. The walls of the Big Khan Mosque were built in 1533, therefore, all former studies of the state of the foundation, walls, materials and mortars used in the construction process, estimation of the effect of additional loads, etc. were intended to show the possible variability of materials for the restoration work.

Medieval construction technology is very interesting. It combines specific local ancient building traditions with the new trends, contemporary to the epoch. For example, Crimea is a seismic zone, therefore, in order to avoid earthquake damage, oak beams and a mixture of clay and lime mortar were used for the horizontal bond frame, thereby stabilizing the walls. The modern version - a horizontal bond frame of reinforced concrete - is heavier and lacks plasticity to external impact.

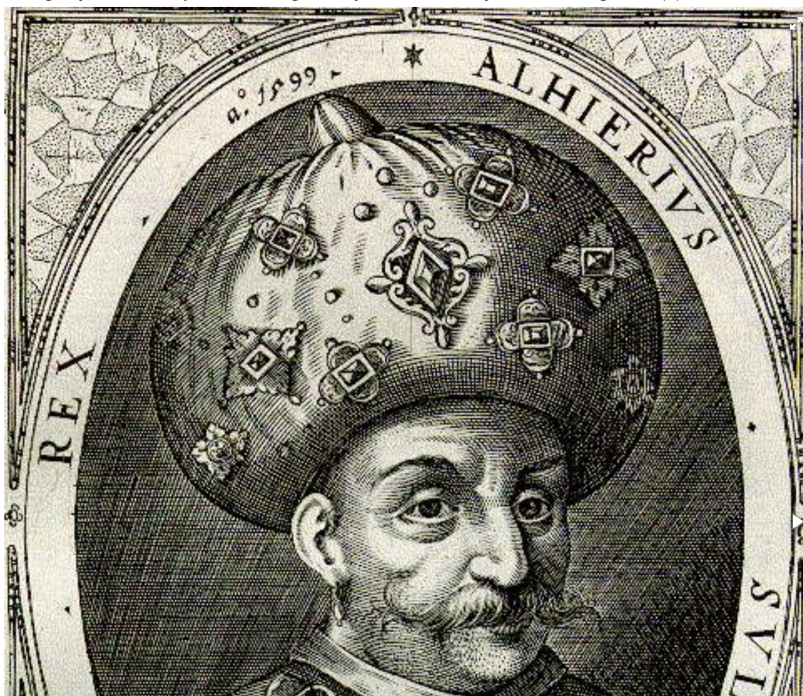
All operations carried out in 2017 and 2018 certainly made the structure heavier, and the concrete sped up the erosion of the rubble masonry of the walls. This led to serious deformations. The stained-glass windows were destroyed (photo 13), the walls were covered with cracks. A crack also appeared on the eastern minaret of the mosque (which had a slight tilt prior to the operations) (photo 14).

Things have got worse due to the fact that the roof was dismantled in the autumn and winter period of 2017 and 2018, while the structure of the monument was not protected from precipitation. Polyethylene coating did not meet the most basic protection requirements and moisture got inside (photo 15).

Another great loss was the damage to the murals on the southern and western facades of the building (originally made by master Omer in the 18th century). (photo 16).

Construction operations and exposure to mechanical impact caused cracks on some of the gravestones of the Khan cemetery (photo 17, photo 18).

This kind of "restoration" under the occupant rule ultimately violated the aesthetic integrity of the object, its singularity, authenticity and its original appearance.





Aggressive reconstruction: expert assessments

Modern best practices worldwide lean toward restoration, whereas reconstruction is only recommended in exceptional cases, e.g. when a monument is destroyed in the course of a military conflict or by an act of God. Restoration aims to preserve the authentic material structure of the monument as a carrier of historical, scientific, architectural and artistic information, and to bring its form in line with its historical and cultural content. However, the measures taken by the occupants in Bakhchysaray destroyed the historical object and decontextualized it. On 02/22/2018, Crimean restoration professionals expressed concern about the operations going on in the Big Khan Mosque.

Upon closer study of the open-source data about the operations on the territory of the ensemble, several fundamental principles of restoration have been found blatantly breached:

the principle of scientific rigor;

the principle of justifiability while determining the extent of restorative intervention

the principle of reversibility of the completed works.

All the conservation, restoration, fire safety, sanitary and environmental protection, etc. measures applied to a monument shall not:

- result in changes to the monument that would have negative impact on its aesthetic, historical, scientific or artistic value;
- be aimed at eliminating important contributions from all periods to the creation of the monument.

Without a doubt, the Big Khan Mosque was in need of restoration, the kind that would ensure maximum preservation of the monument's authenticity. The restoration had to be preceded by a thorough study of the monument. It was supposed to cover the following points:

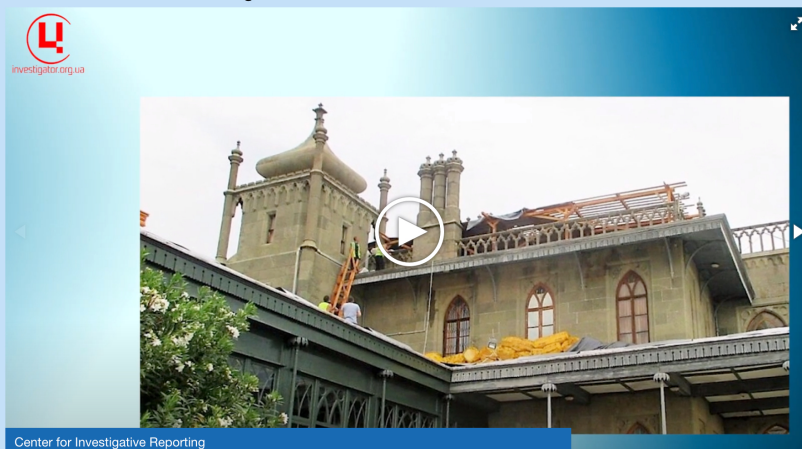
- feasible damage repair techniques, specific features of historical building materials and mortars;
- the study of elements and details pertaining to the original appearance of the mosque, as well as the later layers, follow-up construction and reconstructions, and their historical value.

In addition, a historical and archival analysis was a must. All of this would have helped the professionals to restore the original appearance while preserving the historicity and authenticity of the monument.

In reality, the studies were superficial and the engineering decisions that followed only confirmed the absence of a professional approach to restoration.

According to the experts from the International Center for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the work done at this site has characteristic features of a new construction (see Letter from the ICCROM National Committee). Extensive replacement of the original wooden structural elements with modern materials not pertaining to the Crimean Tatar construction practices distorts the historical authenticity of the entire ensemble, violates the aesthetic value and integrity of the monument and causes irreparable damage to the history and culture of the Crimean Tatars.

According to the expert analysis of the open electronic Crimean sources and photographic evidence, the general contractor and the author of the project is ATTA Group – an entity that has no prior experience in restoration work. The subcontractor for the work is OOO Kiramet. The client of the work is the so-called "Committee for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Crimea"; its chairman - Sergey Yefimov had been engaged in cartography until 2014. First deputy chairman of the committee – Alexander Didenko, an athlete, had no prior experience in restoration at all. In the Bakhchysaray Khan's palace, contractors have been constantly changing and eventually going into insolvency. The situation has been getting more and more complicated. So far, the works are going on 8 out of 16 objects comprising the complex, contracts have been signed for the development of project documentation for three more objects, and two more contracts are being finalized.



P.S.

The so-called "emergency response" works continue on almost all sites across the ensemble of the Bakhchysaray Khan's Palace: the main building (roof dismantled, metal frame being installed), the Khan's cemetery (archaeological works and restoration of two Dürbe tombs), the Pool, the Embassy and the Persian courtyards ("revitalization"), library building ("roof dismantling"), Falcon tower ("roof dismantling").

The palace square revitalization plan envisages installation of statues of animals, which is contrary to the cultural context of the monument (due to the aniconism in Islam). There are plans to demolish historic structures dating back to the 17th century.

Researchers recorded instances of Christian holidays held on the territory of the Khan's Palace, which, to a certain extent, contributes to the historical decontextualization of the cultural heritage.

The state of the Big Khan Mosque is not stable, with visible [displacement of soil and the development of cracks](#).

Document
Joint statement of the ICU and UNC ICOMOS, ICCROM
[Read more..](#)

Document
Ukraine calls on UNESCO
[Read more..](#)

Document
UNESCO notes the deterioration
[Read more..](#)

Document
UNESCO intensifies monitoring
[Read more..](#)

Background information
Offenses in the field of protection of cultural

By devaluing (albeit through rebuilding) the historical significance of the object, which is an important symbol for the indigenous people of Ukraine, the occupation administration carries on the with long-term strategy of the Soviet regime (the legal successor of which is the Russian Federation) aimed at wiping out the historical memory, changing the mindset and assimilating the Crimean Tatar ethnic group.

Under the procedural management of the Prosecutor's Office of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, a pre-trial investigation is underway in a number of criminal proceedings on the facts of illegal prospecting and archaeological excavations, deliberate destruction and damage to historical monuments and cultural heritage in the temporarily occupied territory of the Crimean peninsula constituting criminal offenses under Parts 1, 3 Article 298, Part 2 Article 201, Article 341, Article 356, Part 1 Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

Illegitimate bodies on the temporarily occupied territory of the Crimean peninsula seized 32 real estate objects in Bakhchysaray comprising the monument of national importance Khan's Palace and part of the Bakhchysaray State Historical and Cultural Reserve. It has been established that deliberate destruction and damage to this historical monument is carried out by way of extensive works performed illegally.

The occupation administration is engaged in activities detrimental to the objects of national, cultural, ethnic and historical heritage in the temporarily occupied territory of the Crimean peninsula, as well as the national interests of Ukraine.

These activities constitute an offense under Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine (violation of the laws and customs of war), since they are in direct violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its supplementary protocols. Despite the numerous statements by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine reports by the Director-General of UNESCO and UNESCO decisions demanding the Russian Federation to stop the construction works on the monument, to revert to unconditional fulfillment of their obligations in the field of protection of cultural property in accordance with international laws and to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, the situation remains unchanged.

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Sources

