

Colonization through destruction and distortion: the case of the Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace

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The most glaring example of a violation of international humanitarian law in the field of cultural heritage protection is the situation in the Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace (Palace of Crimean Khans), the main residence of the Crimean Khanate's rulers (from the first third of the XVI up to the end of the XVIII century), unique monument of Crimean Tatars' palace architecture, the only palace complex of the Chingizid dynasty in the world preserved up to date.

Over the past 8 years since the occupation of the Crimea by Russia the human rights defenders have been consistently recording gross violations of human rights in this territory. Even today Russia, as a legal successor to the USSR and the Russian Empire, conducts a discriminatory policy towards the Crimean Tatars, who are indigenous people of Ukraine, aimed at suppressing the will, the dignity of the nation, at their forced relocation and further assimilation.

According to the provisions of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) (hereinafter referred to as the "Convention"), the State which carried out the occupation is obliged to ensure the proper protection of and respect for cultural property. Article 4 hereof prohibits the use of such valuables, facilities for their protection and directly adjacent areas for purposes, which can lead to these values' destruction or damage, and includes a provision to prevent any acts of vandalism against cultural property.

The monuments of the complex certainly required restoration. But it should have been carried out with the aim of preserving its historical authenticity and the authenticity of its components and elements, with the most complete preservation of its artistic, historical, scientific value, as well as its interconnectedness with the surrounding architectural and landscape environment. The transformation of a monument or the substitution of its original parts with new parts shall be allowed only provided it is the only possibility of preserving the monument or if the transformation does not diminish the cultural historical, artistic, scientific value of the monument.

The following two factors play a decisive role here:

1. The application of basic principles of the restoration works' scientific nature, of the reasonableness of the determining of the restoration method, of the principle of reversibility of the performed work.
2. The use of the authentic building materials and technologies, which allows perseverance of the authenticity of the object as much as possible.

These factors are ultimately important, because authenticity is fundamental in many ways. An ancient building, replaced by a new copy, loses its value as a historical witness of the past, retaining only the value of a visual illustration. It no longer exists as a monument of material culture.

What has been happening at the Khan's palace in Bakhchisaray (Crimea, Ukraine)?

Since 2016 the work has been being carried out, that have nothing in common with restoration works and the aforementioned principles of restoration. The scale of destruction is truly appalling:

- all the works have been being conducted without any thorough and comprehensive scientific research that must be done prior the restoration works and be a rationale for any restorative interferences.
- the Great Khan's Mosque ("Buyuk Khan Jami"), the oldest monument of the complex (1533), was the one on which the occupation authorities began the works that not only caused the outrage of Crimean activists, but also became the subject of relevant reports of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The XVIII-XIX centuries roof complex of the Mosque was destroyed in autumn - winter 2016-2017. The authentic oak beams of the roofing were dismantled and sawn; they were then replaced with modern building materials, namely composite beams made using OSB technology with a reinforced concrete belt. According to the so-called project, 100% of the artisan old roof tiles (historically called "Tatarka") were replaced with Spanish factory-made antique-stylized tiles. At the same time, the ancient technology of putting the tiles on clay was completely destroyed and modern mounts were used instead.
- the works are carried out using heavy construction equipment with the use of jackhammers, which led to vibrations and loss of part of the decoration and paintings of the walls.
- as a rule, roof dismantling work at the objects of complex are conducted at autumn - winter season, when the level of precipitations is raising. Due to the lack of a system that would protect from precipitation, the moisture penetrates the monuments.
- all of the aforementioned violations and the additional load on the walls and the base of the buildings have already led to deformations. As a result, in 2018 the stained-glass windows shattered and numerous gaps and cracks appeared on the northern facade of the Mosque, the facade of the Retinue Building. There is also a crack on the tilted East Minaret.
- in 2018 a steel canopy was installed over the Khan Palace main building without any necessary research including geological survey. Experts have already spoken about the threat of a possible tilt of this steel canopy.
- at the beginning of February 2022, the reasons that were written above and the dismantling of hard surface and soil that has been being carried out in immediate proximity to the ancient buildings led to the subsidence and horizontal movement of soils. As a result, the north-eastern corner of the Retinue building was torn off from the complex wall, which was accompanied by spiral deformation and appearance of wide and deep cracks.
- to date, the so-called "restoration work" has been targeted at almost all objects of the complex.
- today Khan Palace is a complex of architectural and historical monuments and archeological objects. As a monument of the archeology, Khan Palace can cover a larger area than the area of the museum, which was founded on the basis of architectural and historical monuments. But the existence of the archaeological heritage of the complex is not recognized by the occupation authorities. It leads to carrying out of the building works without archeological excavation and the losses of cultural treasures that are hidden in the soil that are thrown away without any control.

Experts at the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Ukraine concluded that the works carried out by the Russian Federation in the complex are not of a restorative nature; they are typical of a new construction and have led to disfigurement, as well as irreparable loss of authentic elements of the ancient architecture that is part of the unique complex "Khan's Palace", which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List.

The careful concealment by the Russian occupation authorities of all the circumstances connected with the works on

The current concealment by the Russian occupation authorities of all the circumstances connected with the items on the territory of the Khan Palace further strengthens the suspicions of the experts that a real threat of destruction is hanging over the unique historical and architectural monument of The Crimean Tatar people.

Despite the efforts and active actions of the concerned Crimean activists, of Ukrainian diplomats, who put this issue on the agenda of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in March 2018 and included it to a report on the worsening situation with the protection of cultural heritage in Russia-occupied Crimea, the work on the territory of the Bakhchisaray Palace has not stopped.

Monuments at all times were destroyed and demolished for ideological reasons, in order to destroy the symbolism of the hated past.

After the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, their culture was completely destroyed: "toponymic repressions" were carried out on the peninsula, the Soviets destroyed Crimean Tatar monuments and cemeteries, burned manuscripts and books, turned mosques into movie theaters and shops. Large-scale falsification of the history of the peninsula, which led to the emergence and existence to this day of many myths, continues even now, aiming to justify the criminal decisions of the Soviet regime.

After such an almost total elimination, the miraculously preserved Bakhchisaray Khan's palace became for the Crimean Tatar people, especially during and after their return to their homeland, not only a confirmation of their origin and development of their statehood on this territory, but also a sacred symbol of revival on their native land.

The Russian Federation, as the successor of the former USSR and the Russian Empire, again resorted to manipulation and direct lies, trying to justify the occupation with allegedly "historical arguments", most of which are misinformation and propaganda. Modern-Russia's humanitarian policy in the occupied territory aims to destroy the historical and cultural ties between the peninsula and mainland Ukraine, and to include Crimea in the Russian ideological paradigm.

Among those desperately needing protection are the objects of Crimean Tatar history and culture that "do not fit" into the Russian ideology; the true, unfalsified history of Crimea and the Crimean Tatar people, the historical memory of the indigenous people of the peninsula about their statehood.

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