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Houses of Culture in Border Settlements: War and Social-Cultural Life of the Community

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Soviet-era Cultural Houses have always served the Soviet ideology and agenda, becoming a unique cultural environment in the life of communities. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these Cultural Houses have undergone various developments, ranging from "Soviet destruction" to re-conceptualization. It is especially important to examine what changes these institutions have undergone in border settlements. This article discusses the "developments" of Cultural Houses in the border communities of Tavush and Syunik regions, and the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh 44 day war (2020) on the life and activities of these community centers.

Մշակույթի տները սահմանամերձ բնակավայրերում. պատերազմը և համայնքի սոցիալ-մշակութային կյանքը¹

Հայկուհի Մուրադյան

Երևանի պետական համալսարան, Մշակութաբանության ամբիոն,

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ հնագիտության և ազգագրության ինստիտուտ

Հիմնաբառեր՝ մշակույթի տներ, սահմանամերձ համայնքներ,
պատերազմ, սոցիալ-մշակութային առումներ:

¹ Հոդվածը տպագրվել է «22YR-6A010» ծածկագրով ծրագրի շրջանակում:
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Սովետական շրջանում ձևավորված մշակույթի տները մշտապես սպասարկել են խորհրդային գաղափարախոսությանը և օրակարգին՝ դառնալով յուրօրինակ մշակութային միջավայր համայնքների կյանքում: Խորհրդային Միության փլուզումից հետո ստեղծված նոր տնտեսական, սոցիալական և աշխարհաքաղաքական իրավիճակում մշակույթի տները շատ տարբեր զարգացումներ են ունեցել՝ վերածվելով «սովետական ավերակացումից» մինչև նորովի վերակոցնեպտավորումը: Հատկապես ակրևոր է ուսումնասիրել թե ինչ փոփոխություններ են կրել այս կառույցները սահմանային բնակավայրերում: Այս հոդվածում քննարկում ենք Տավուշի և Սյունիքի սահմանամերձ համայնքների մշակույթի տների «զարգացումները», և հայ-ադրբեջանական պատերազմի ազդեցությունը այդ համայնքի մշակույթի տների կյանքի և գործունեության վրա:

Дома культуры в приграничных населенных пунктах: война и социально-культурная жизнь сообщества

Այկուի Մուրադյան

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Ключевые слова: Дома культуры, приграничные сообщества, война, социально-культурные аспекты.

В советский период дома культуры всегда служили идеологии и повестке советской власти, становясь уникальной культурной средой в жизни местных общин. После распада Советского Союза в условиях нового экономического, социального и геополитического положения дома культуры претерпели различные изменения - от «советского разрушения» до нового концептуального обновления. Особенно важно исследовать, какие изменения претерпели эти учреждения в приграничных поселениях. В данной статье рассматриваются «развития» домов культуры в приграничных общинах Тавуша и Сюника, а также влияние армяно-азербайджанской войны на жизнь и деятельность домов культуры этих общин.

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Introduction: What is “House of Culture”? Houses of Culture (HC) and Palaces of Culture (PC) are among the most recognizable symbols of the former Soviet Union. Established following the October Revolution, initially in Russia and later in the other Soviet republics, these institutions aimed to shape, disseminate, and popularize Marxist-Leninist culture, while also serving as

primary venues for organizing leisure time for the working class and peasants, simultaneously propagating communist ideology [Ghazanjyan 1964, 35].

From the onset of the socialist era, these spaces were established as workers' clubs and educational centers. Nearly every major industrial facility was home to a House of Culture or Palace of Culture. In the Soviet Union, these institutions were classified into several categories, including those affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, trade unions, intellectuals, teachers' associations, and others. Additionally, there were specialized establishments such as officers' clubs for the Soviet military, pioneer and schoolchildren's palaces, and folk-art houses [Folyan 1933, 15].

The mass development of Houses of Culture began in November 1920 with the issuance of a decree by the Soviet People's Commissariat to establish the Central Political Enlightenment Committee. The first significant cultural establishment under the centralized Union of Creative Associations was the Maxim Gorky Palace of Culture in Leningrad. Following World War II, similar institutions were established across other Soviet republics. While the names of these institutions were often translated into the local languages, some exceptions were made, where the term *chitalishne* (literally "reading room") was retained to designate these spaces.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many countries abandoned the Soviet nomenclature, rebranding these institutions as cultural centers, concert halls, or other forms. However, in some regions, they retained their original names. This phenomenon is not unique to the former Soviet Union. Similar establishments can be found in other socialist countries, such as the Casa de la Cultura in Spain and Latin America, or Centre Culturel in France, where Soviet models influenced cultural policy during the leadership of André Malraux and Charles de Gaulle [Loosley, 2001].

Reconceptualization of Houses of Culture Post-Velvet Revolution. After the Velvet Revolution, significant changes began in Armenia's cultural governance system, affecting both the optimization of infrastructure and the restructuring of programs, as well as transforming public perceptions of culture [Muradyan, 2021]. In the context of public shifts in cultural perception, the selection of cultural management tools, and infrastructure development, particular attention has been given to initiatives related to cultural centers and the necessity of their reconceptualization.

As Soviet-era institutions, many cultural centers followed diverse paths of development and survival after the collapse of the USSR and the privatization processes of the 1990s. Some were privatized and repurposed for various functions, others were abandoned or destroyed, while some continued to operate under municipal jurisdiction in uncertain conditions [Muradyan, 2019].

In 2020, the "My Step" Foundation launched the "Strengthening Regional Cultural Institutions and Reassessing Their Role in Communities" program. This initiative aimed to enhance regional cultural centers based on a 2019 survey conducted in collaboration with Armenia's Ministry of

Territorial Administration and Infrastructure. The program was designed using both local data and some international practices (<https://hkdepo.am/hy/opportunity/strengthening-regional-development-program>).

The Strengthening Regional Cultural Institutions in Armenia program was launched with the support of key partners, including the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports of Armenia, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure of Armenia, the Intercultural Research, Training, and Dialogue Center NGO, and the KASA Humanitarian Foundation. The initiative aimed to ensure the balanced development of arts and cultural life across Armenia by enhancing the capacity of regional cultural institutions, improving infrastructure, and modernizing technical equipment.

Implemented between January and December 2020, the program focused on two main components: human capacity development and infrastructure renovation, along with technical equipment upgrades. A core aspect of the initiative was the empowerment of cultural institutions through training sessions, study visits, ongoing mentorship, and the creation of a professional network.

Between February and April 2020, employees of selected houses of culture participated in training sessions designed to strengthen their professional skills. Each institution nominated two representatives, usually the director or deputy director, the artistic director, or the program coordinator. The training sessions, which lasted between two to four days, covered key topics such as community and volunteer engagement, including assessing community needs, the organization of public events like cultural programs and workshops, public relations and communication strategies with a focus on social media and marketing tools, efficient space management, and strategies for fundraising through state funding, grant applications, and social entrepreneurship.

A crucial part of the program was the organization of study visits on the third day of each training session. Participants visited various cultural, youth, and educational institutions in Armenia's regions and in Yerevan, which were recognized for their active community engagement, innovative cultural projects, and successful social entrepreneurship models. These visits provided practical insights and inspiration for the participating cultural institutions, helping them adapt and implement effective strategies in their own communities.

This program was not fully implemented because the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh began in September 2020. During the war, cultural houses in villages and towns along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border were transformed into centers providing social services, offering shelter, food, psychological support, and information assistance.

The Research Landscape: Border Communities in Syunik and Tavush. The research conducted for this article focuses on the border communities of the Syunik and Tavush regions of Armenia. These regions, which have long been centers of strategic importance, face ongoing challenges due to their proximity to conflict zones and the political and economic instability of the broader region.

The specific cases chosen for study—Shinuhayr, Verishen, Khndozoresk, Qarahunj in Syunik region and Aygedzor, Berd, Koghb, Berdavan in Tavush region—provide unique insights into how Houses of Culture continue to function in post-Soviet Armenia. These villages represent a cross-section of the Armenian borderland experience, where social and cultural life is deeply intertwined with the broader geopolitical context (ill 1).

These cases show completely different fates of cultural houses, ranging from total destruction to re-conceptualization and new functional roles in community life.

Abandoned House of Culture: the case of Shinuhayr. In the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on the social, economic, and cultural life of Armenia. The Armenian-Azerbaijani war further exacerbated the already challenging circumstances faced by Armenia, leading to significant crises in various sectors, including the cultural sphere. A considerable number of cultural institutions experienced a decline in financial support, resulting in their closure despite the allocation of funds by both the community and the state. One of such cases is the village of Shinuhayr village in Syunik region.

The village's cultural house was located in the center of the village and was built during the late Soviet period in the 1980s. Interestingly, nostalgic memories of the cultural house were preserved among the community's residents, but there was no documentation about when the village was founded or who designed the project. It was a typical two-story cultural house, with a large hall on the first floor intended for cultural events, and cultural groups functioning on the second floor. Today, only ruins of this large building remain, which has turned into a garbage dump. On the same landscape, right next to the house of culture, a single church of the village was built in the early 2000s (ill. 2), which seems to have "replaced" some of the cultural house's functions, becoming the village's gathering place, the main spot for sharing news and communication. In addition, in a nearby building adjacent to the church, groups for the Youth House were opened, where children from the village and nearby villages attend painting, pottery, and dance classes. Fieldwork revealed that the construction of the church and the opening of the Youth House became particularly important when, in the late 1990s, representatives of the Protestant church, especially so called "50s" (հիսունականներ), entered the village. Today, there are people "50s" in the village, but our survey showed that most of the villagers try to ignore their presence and exclude them from various village discussions. Interestingly, this "religious struggle" was also reflected in the village's social structure as well. The fact that cultural houses, if the

building is at least partially preserved and can be used, were transformed into Youth Houses in the post-Soviet period, has been observed in examples from Yerevan, Vanadzor, and Gyumri [Muradyan 2023]. In the case of Shinuhayr, we see that since the cultural house was destroyed and could no longer be used in any form, a church and a Youth House were built on the same landscape. This once again allows us to conclude that there were many functional similarities between the cultural house and the church, which made this substitution possible.

Houses of culture as a hub for “western” projects: the case of Verishen village. A notable transformation has occurred in the function of houses of culture, which have become increasingly prominent. These “typical Soviet” structures, which were once considered useful for propaganda purposes and were funded by the state, have now become attractive venues for “Western” projects. One notable example is Verishen village in the Syunik region. In this case, we are dealing not with destruction but with functional transformation. Verishen village is located 3 km from Goris. After the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war, due to repeated violations of the Armenian border by the Azerbaijani forces, the village was shelled. The villagers shared stories of how rockets hit their homes, who was affected, and so on. After the war, the village took in thousands of refugees from the Hadrut and Shushi regions of Nagorno-Karabakh, who settled in the homes and buildings of Verishen and nearby villages. During this time, Verishen’s cultural house became a shelter for the refugees, as well as a center for distributing social aid (ill. 3). The Women’s Resource Center, funded by the U.S. Embassy, was also based in Verishen’s cultural house. The Women’s Resource Center began working on the integration of refugees, particularly women, and addressing issues related to employment. In October 2023, I visited the village and witnessed how the women from Artsakh were preparing “zhengyalov hats” (a traditional bread from Artsakh, filled with greens, unique to the region’s cuisine) in anticipation of meeting the U.S. ambassador. It was perhaps a coincidence, but it is always interesting to observe from the field and see how such a structure functions and what role it plays in the cultural and social life of the community. My participation that day was particularly interesting because the Artsakh women demonstrated how they were occupied and showed the effectiveness and importance of all the groups that had been established at the center.

“Modernized” Houses of culture: the case of Khnzoresk. The third case we have chosen for the research is another border village in Syunik province—Khdzoresk. In Khdzoresk, we recorded a very interesting case, where part of the cultural house was renovated through Western grants and turned into a cultural and recreational center for the community’s youth, in a loft-style. The renovated space now features modernly furnished rooms for discussions and meetings, and most interestingly, the Soviet library, which was preserved in its original form, still holding volumes of Lenin’s works, was enriched with new literature—mainly in English. One of the rooms was

newly furnished and transformed into a recreational center for teenagers and a place for children's activities, with a specialist present. The example of Khnzoreshk demonstrates how a Soviet-era structure is "Westernized" and becomes a modern cultural and recreational hub for different age groups in the community (ill 4).

House of culture as a community hall: the case of Qarahunj. The last case we selected from Syunik province is about the depletion of the cultural house as a social and cultural institution. In this case, the building still exists and has not turned into ruins, but it no longer serves as a cultural house. Instead, it has become the community administration office. Formally, the cultural house still operates—it has the position of a cultural house director, but this position primarily addresses social issues. Similar cases were also recorded in the Republic of Artsakh during fieldwork in 2018. This group includes those cultural houses that, on paper, still exist but no longer hold any significance in the cultural life of the community. They no longer carry out cultural functions, and the local administration simply appoints the person who is in need of social assistance to the director's position. This is the case of Qarahunj.

In Tavush province, all the previously mentioned cases can be observed in various border settlements, but in Berd city, we encountered an interesting example that we have not recorded in any other region. The case of Berd city is unique in the management system of cultural houses, as in 2018, it attempted to create a local model. In this model, the central cultural house of the consolidated community becomes a model for other communities, providing programs, technical and professional support, as well as becoming the planner and monitor of the activities of cultural houses in smaller communities. Although this model is quite interesting in a context where cultural houses do not have a unified management or operational concept, it faces significant challenges—ranging from local issues and a lack of resources to setting long-term goals and finding mechanisms for implementation.

In the Tavush province, the neighboring villages of Koghb and Berdavan in Noyemberyan region also provide interesting examples from the perspective of cultural house development. The cultural house in Koghb started operating in 1945 as part of the village council. Cultural life in Koghb was quite active and prominent. In 1976, a new, typified building for the cultural house was put into operation. In 2002, the cultural house was renamed the Koghb Cultural Center and was granted legal entity status. The center employs more than 10 staff members. The events organized by the center have received widespread attention in the region, and their scope continues to grow day by day. The center houses the village history museum, established in 1970. The museum is filled with interesting exhibits and attracts numerous visitors.

The Koghb Cultural Center hosts memorable days, holiday, and concert events, mostly with the participation of talented locals. Traditional evenings honoring famous fellow villagers

have become a regular part of the cultural calendar. With the support of the village administration and the efforts of the staff, Koghb's cultural life is thriving according to the mentioned activities.

However, the village administration's limited resources are insufficient to address certain issues that have arisen and require urgent solutions. These include the very poor condition of the roof and the concert hall, where the state of the theatrical chairs—handed down from the 1970s—has become a particular concern, as well as the gymnasium.

In the Berdavan community of Tavush province, the opening of a Youth and Cultural Center took place, “Strength, Hope, Light”. It was created by the Humanitarian Foundation of the "Institute for Communication Development," with technical support from the Berdavan Charitable Foundation.

The Berdavan case demonstrates the capacity of private foundations to contribute to the operations of houses of culture, thereby underscoring their pivotal role in the cultural landscape of the community (Ill 5).

Conclusions. The presented examples of cultural houses demonstrate that the dissolution of the Soviet Union, accompanied by other concurrent challenges in Armenia, such as the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, the collapse of the socio-economic system, and the devastating earthquake in the city of Spitak and its aftermath, engendered substantial financial and ideological challenges in the cultural sphere. In response to these challenges, cultural houses adopted diverse strategies for survival, ranging from abandonment and emptying to transformation into structures operating according to a Western concept. The varied changes and divergent outcomes illustrate that, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the cultural policy of the Republic of Armenia did not prioritize the restoration and re-conceptualization of Soviet cultural structures. Instead, it failed to establish new ideological objectives, leading these structures to attempt to continue their existence in various ways.

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Ill. 1 The map of researched settlemtnes.



Ill. 2 Shinuahayr village: the church and the house of culture



Ill. 2 a Shinuhayr: House of culture in ruins



Ill. 3 Verishen village: House of culture



Ill. 4 Khnzoreshk: House of Culture

Արվեստ և մշակույթ/Art and Culture

Houses of Culture in Border Settlements: War and Social-Cultural Life of the Community

Մշակույթի տները սահմանամերձ բնակավայրերում. պատերազմը և համայնքի սոցիալ-մշակութային կյանքը



Ill. 5 Berdavan village; House of Culture

