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Exhibitionist violence: Explaining the display of war crimes in Karabakh

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Abstract

This paper examines the logic of exhibitionist violence in the context of the Karabakh conflict, focusing on the deliberate filming and dissemination of war crimes. It introduces the concept of wartime exhibitionist violence — the strategic use of violent imagery to demoralize adversaries, consolidate in-group cohesion, and influence global narratives. Drawing on anthropology of war and media studies, the analysis situates this practice within broader frameworks of symbolic communication, psychological warfare, and digital propaganda. Empirical material includes verified video evidence from the conflict and qualitative interviews, revealing how perpetrators employ media as both weapon and performance. The paper engages with the work of Lee Ann Fujii, Randall Collins, and Roger Gould to explain the performative and communicative dimensions of such acts. Ultimately, the study underscores the need to view exhibitionist violence not as senseless brutality, but as an intentional, politically charged strategy with deep cultural and political impacts.

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Key words

Anthropology of war, exhibitionist violence, symbolic communication, digital propaganda, (extra-lethal) humiliation, identity politics, power relationships, Karabakh

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la lógica de la violencia exhibicionista en el contexto del conflicto de Karabaj, centrándose en la grabación y divulgación deliberada de crímenes de guerra. Introduce el concepto de violencia exhibicionista en tiempos de guerra: el uso estratégico de imaginería violenta para desmoralizar al enemigo, consolidar la cohesión de grupo e influir las narrativas globales. Partiendo de la antropología de los estudios de guerra y medios, el análisis sitúa esta práctica en marcos más amplios de comunicación simbólica, guerra psicológica y propaganda digital. El material empírico incluye pruebas verificadas de vídeos del conflicto y entrevistas cualitativas que revelan cómo los perpetradores utilizan los medios como arma y a la vez como actuación. El artículo dialoga con el trabajo de Lee Ann Fujii, Randall Collins y Roger Gould para explicar las dimensiones performativas y comunicativas de tales actos. En última instancia, el estudio subraya la necesidad de ver la violencia exhibicionista no como brutalidad sin sentido, sino como una estrategia intencionada y políticamente cargada, con profundo impacto cultural y político.

Palabras clave

Antropología de la guerra, violencia exhibicionista, comunicación simbólica, propaganda digital, humillación (extraletal), políticas de identidad, relaciones de poder, Karabaj

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1. Introduction: Exhibitionist violence as political strategy and symbolic communication

Why would military personnel film and distribute video evidence of their own war crimes? In modern conflicts, the strategic dissemination of violent imagery via digital platforms has become a core component of psychological warfare, propaganda, and identity politics. This phenomenon, which I will call wartime exhibitionist violence, involves the intentional broadcasting of brutality, not only to demoralize adversaries but also to rally in-group cohesion, signal power, and influence global perception.

The concept of exhibitionist violence as message was articulated by political anthropologist Lee Ann Fujii in her study of ISIS media tactics, where she described such acts as performative violence — a form of "filmed cruelty" meant to send symbolic messages to multiple audiences simultaneously (Fujii 2015). Rather than viewing violent acts as spontaneous or purely utilitarian, Fujii suggests they operate as a kind of text, encoded with meaning, status claims, and moral boundaries. In this sense, spectacular violence is a communicative strategy, especially in asymmetric warfare or contexts of weak state legitimacy (Arendt 1970, Sluka 2000, Collins 2008).

Public displays of violence — beheadings, humiliation of prisoners, or desecration of symbols — function as an "aesthetic of terror" (Taussig 1986), transforming cruelty into narrative. This practice serves several purposes: to intimidate, to provoke, to claim revenge, and to reinforce ideological belonging. During wartime, such as the current Russia-Ukraine war, a real-time flow of violent imagery produces the "mediatization of war" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010, 2011), where digital platforms become both battlefield and archive.[2]

This study builds on existing theories of violent displays and performative violence to examine how acts of brutality function as both identity markers and assertions of hierarchy in conflict (Collins 2008, Fujii 2013b, 2015, 2021). In particular, the paper draws on Roger Gould's (1999, 2003) sociological studies of blood feuding in which he argues that when status hierarchies are unclear, violence becomes more likely during conflict. The more unclear the status hierarchy (note: not status on Karabakh, but status of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the contexts of various empires – see Alstadt 1992, Suny 1993), the worse the violence and the more status requires communicating through performance and display (see examples from 2016 in Bohjalian 2016, Panorama 2016, Shahnazarian 2025 p. 201).

This insight is especially important when examining the wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh (Tokluoğlu 2013). On Gould's theory, these wars were contested by groups occupying varying positions in an unclear status hierarchy, producing incentives for extreme violence as a marker of dominance. Since this is a matter of status, that violence involved humiliation, recorded for posterity, and

[2] A recent and highly illustrative instance of exhibitionist violence is its deployment in the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war (Hook 2023). A renewed fascination with snuff-like war videos has emerged, produced by both Ukrainian and Russian actors. The two most widely known examples are: (1) a video recorded by Russian soldiers in which a captured Ukrainian serviceman smokes a cigarette and says "Glory to Ukraine" moments before his execution; and (2) footage showing Wagner fighters killing a defected member of their own group by smashing his head with a sledgehammer after apprehending him (Cotovio *et al.* 2023). Numerous other videos linked to this war circulate on platforms such as Telegram and TikTok.

deliberately performed as a message to both the perpetrators' own group (to assert solidarity and superiority) and to the victims (to signal their inferiority). The following section examines the specific colonial legacies that produced this status insecurity.

In explaining the broadcasting of this performative, exhibitionist violence, this paper pursues the following proposition: during a war between two identities where status hierarchies are not clear, the logic of violence will involve humiliation, recorded for posterity, and deliberately performed as a message to both the perpetrators' own group (to assert solidarity and superiority) and to the victims (to signal their inferiority). By embedding the analysis of this proposition within the broader historical trajectory of Soviet nationalities policy and its post-Soviet aftermath, this study makes an original contribution to understanding how spectacle and violence operate in the context of countries formerly part of the Soviet Union.

2. Understanding exhibitionist violence: signals of collective solidarity

For much of the twentieth century, scholars of violence widely assumed that human beings possess an innate proclivity for aggression and cruelty, an idea deeply embedded in both the psychological and anthropological literature. Freud (1930) argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that human aggression is a fundamental drive, constantly at odds with social constraints. Similarly, Konrad Lorenz (1966) posited in *On Aggression*, that violence is an evolutionary adaptation necessary for survival and dominance within social hierarchies. However, this deterministic view was fundamentally challenged by Collins (2008) in his seminal work *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Collins contends that, contrary to popular belief, the execution of violence is not instinctual but deeply aversive for most individuals. Through extensive empirical analysis, he demonstrates that humans exhibit a strong physiological and psychological resistance to harming others in direct confrontations. Drawing from battlefield studies, ethnographic research, and historical accounts, Collins argues that most acts of violence require specific situational conditions: social infrastructure, group pressure, and an audience that either encourages or legitimizes aggression. One of Collins' key contributions is his analysis of "forward panic," a phenomenon in which an individual, initially restrained by tension and fear, suddenly overcomes their hesitations and engages in excessive violence, often in the presence of peers or spectators who reinforce the act. He further suggests that most large-scale violence — whether in war, riots, or organized crime — relies on structured environments that break down moral inhibitions through rituals of dehumanization and coercion (Collins 2008).

Collins' (2008) insights are particularly relevant in the context of wartime exhibitionist violence, where digital platforms provide wide audiences for the performance of violence. The question of who an audience is and how they witness a violent act reframes violence as a communicative act, as a form of text that one can read by varying spectators, and through varying media. In this sense, the form of publicization and the distribution of publicized acts of extreme brutality has a certain instrumentality to it. As Fujii (2021, p. 19) puts it, violent displays are a "powerful way of reordering society and political hierarchies and rewriting the basis for belonging in that order. By putting violence on display, actors are telling the world "who they are" and by extension, who everyone else is not." On this theory, violence is a text, a message. In war, the message

may be intended for various audiences including the opponent, one's own side, third parties, or some mix of these.

Fujii's (2013a, 2021) work on performative violence and its link to identity and hierarchies chimes with Roger Gould's (1999, 2003) work on blood feuding. Gould argues that these seemingly brutal and senseless acts of revenge in fact often serve as signals of collective solidarity, deterring future attacks by demonstrating group cohesion. Blood feuds are only pursued when this cohesion is under question. Similarly, Gould (1999, 2003) also argues that conflict is more likely to turn violent when status hierarchies are unclear and in question. In such conditions, violent acts serve to clarify the status-belonging of the conflicting parties. As such the violence is most effective when witnessed not only by those party to the conflict but by relevant others too. This observation finds support in Anderson's (1999) work on street gangs. He too finds that conflicts are more likely to turn violent over status claims between parties where who has greater status resources is hard to determine. In this way, violence is most effective for establishing status when performed openly for others to view.

These theoretical frameworks acquire particular explanatory force in the post-Soviet South Caucasus. The 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan unfolded against the backdrop of a Soviet nationalities policy that had produced a specific and deeply contested hierarchical ordering of ethnic groups — one whose unresolved tensions, as the following sections show, fed directly into the logic of exhibitionist violence.

The Bolsheviks made this classification as part of a policy of affirmative action that sought to empower non-Russian nationalities through the promotion of indigenous languages, educational opportunities, and national institutions (Martin 2001). In the South Caucasus, Armenia and Georgia, with their established nationalist movements, literate urban intelligentsia, and pre-existing literary traditions, benefited significantly from this policy. The Armenian language, for example, was promoted through state-funded institutions, while Armenian intellectuals played an active role in shaping Soviet cultural life. By contrast, Azerbaijan was framed as a republic in need of Soviet-led modernization. The Azerbaijani language underwent multiple script changes (from Arabic to Latin and later to Cyrillic), disrupting linguistic continuity and making cultural development more dependent on Soviet state intervention (Martin 2001, p. 318).

Despite this privileged classification of Armenians within the Soviet hierarchy, the decision in 1923 to place over 80% of Armenian-populated Karabakh under Azerbaijani control produced tensions. Martin (2001) argues that Soviet nationalities policy only appeared ethnocentric but was instead dictated by broader political and strategic considerations. The decision to assign Karabakh to Azerbaijan can be understood in this context: although Armenians were regarded as a "more advanced" nationality, Stalin sought to cultivate Azerbaijan as a loyal ally and maintain favorable relations with Turkey, a key geopolitical concern in the 1920s (Suny 1993, Hovsepyan and Tonoyan 2025). Meanwhile, Armenia still received significant Soviet investment in high-tech industries, scientific research, and higher education. Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, became a hub for advanced scientific institutions such as the Yerevan Physics Institute, reflecting a broader Soviet trend of investing in knowledge-based economies in so-called "cultured" republics (Suny 1993, Martin 2001). Azerbaijan's economic structure, by contrast, remained more extractive and resource-driven. This disparity extended to

Karabakh, where Armenians developed a strong intellectual elite in Stepanakert (the Armenian name for the capital of Karabakh) but found themselves administratively and politically subordinated to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan.

Thus, Soviet policy towards the South Caucasus was dynamic, and shifted in response to broader ideological and geopolitical concerns. During the Stalinist era, the relative privilege of Armenians was maintained at the national level, yet localized decisions, such as the subordination of Karabakh to Azerbaijan, revealed inconsistencies in the designation of privileges and resources (Kösen and Erdoğan 2022). Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, Azerbaijan gained greater influence within the Soviet administrative system, contributing to growing tensions in Karabakh. By the late 1980s, as Soviet control weakened, the contradictions embedded in these policies became more pronounced, fueling nationalist mobilization among Karabakh Armenians who sought unification with Armenia. This mobilization produced the Karabakh War of 1988-1994 in which Azerbaijan lost control over Karabakh as well as regions belonging to Azerbaijan that surrounded it.

During the 1991-1994 Karabakh war, the Armenian military benefited from the fact that Armenians had historically attained higher ranks within the Soviet Army, whereas Azerbaijanis had not advanced to the same degree (De Waal 2003, Zurcher 2007). This dynamic contributed to disparities in military effectiveness, reinforcing the perception that Armenians had been favored in Soviet institutions. At the same time, Azerbaijani narratives emphasized the victimization of their soldiers within the Soviet military, which they perceived as an Armenian-dominated space, thereby deepening grievances and a sense of historical injustice. Rumors and myths circulating in Azerbaijan in 1988, before the outbreak of widespread violence, alluded to the perceived superior status of Armenians within the Soviet Army. For instance, it was alleged that Azerbaijani conscripts were deliberately brutalized or even killed by high-ranking officers of Armenian origin to weaken Azerbaijani morale and prevent resistance in the struggle over Karabakh. "All of Baku was talking about the condition in which our boys were brought back from the [Soviet] army — people said one had been gutted and stuffed with hay, another had been dismembered so badly they wouldn't even open the coffin. Everyone was sure it was the Armenians who did it, [Soviet] army officers (…) they were firmly in control there," – said Salima, a female Azerbaijani war veteran my colleague interviewed as part of a research project on the war.[3] After losing the 1991-1994 war, Azerbaijan's trajectory was one of internal political strife and weakened social cohesion.

The Soviet approach to governing its periphery was not unique in fostering interethnic antagonism; rather, it aligned with a broader colonial practice of manipulating divisions among colonized peoples, both deliberately and inadvertently. There is a well-established body of historical literature detailing how colonial powers, including the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, exploited ethnic tensions to maintain control (Hirsch 2005). The Soviet case is particularly noteworthy for the deep status insecurities it created among peripheral nationalities. Regardless of how one interprets the historical record, Russian and Soviet interventions generated profound anxieties regarding ethnic

[3] Interview with a former woman-fighter and participant in a joint research project on women-warriors conducted 2023-2025. This interview is one of 17 conducted on the Azerbaijani side, contributing to a comparative analysis across both sides. The name of the participant is not real.

status and political positioning. In particular, ethnic hierarchies in the Soviet military produced a specific status anxiety among Azerbaijanis as concerns the effective use of violence. In fact, Armenians were not inherently privileged across all domains at all — indeed, they too suffered under Soviet nationalities policy. The point is that the status hierarchy was ambiguous, generating unresolved grievances on both sides. This ambiguity meant that Azerbaijanis, unlike in their interactions with Russians, felt compelled to prove themselves in relation to Armenians, both militarily and politically (De Waal 2003, p. 178).

The status insecurity wrought by Russian and Soviet colonialism in the South Caucasus provides an important context for understanding both the degree of brutality that emerged during the 2020 Karabakh War and the incentive to exhibit it. Focusing specifically on the actions of Azerbaijani military units, the paper interprets exhibitionist violence as a symbolic act aimed at reaffirming national unity. In the authoritarian Azerbaijani context, where public expressions of dissent are heavily constrained, such acts may function as a grisly feedback mechanism, testing the limits of internal solidarity. By taking this focus, the paper does not intend to diminish violence committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis. However, since Azerbaijan was victorious in the 2020 war, there is a greater amount of documentation of exhibitionist violence by the Azerbaijani side. Thus, the paper takes on the question of why Azerbaijan's victorious military would risk their reputation through publicizing human rights abuses.

During the 2020 war, the emergence of cheap and accessible digital technologies allowed for the real-time documentation and online dissemination of this violence (though it took place earlier, see Hersh 2004). Short videos showing the torture or execution of Armenian captives began to circulate as part of a new performative regime of violence where the camera itself became a weapon of humiliation and domination (Hersh 2004). In this context, modern media technologies amplified what had once been symbolic but largely hidden acts of violence, transforming them into viral spectacles of nationalist affirmation. I now turn to the methods and data collected for this paper.

3. Methods

Researching wartime violence entails significant methodological and ethical challenges, particularly in contexts where access to primary data is constrained and testimonies are shaped by trauma and political sensitivities. To address these limitations, this study adopts a qualitative multi-method design combining visual analysis, narrative biographical interviews, and secondary sources.

The primary dataset consists of 13 publicly available videos documenting acts of violence, humiliation, and abuse perpetrated by Azerbaijani military personnel or affiliated actors against Armenian civilians and prisoners of war. These videos represent the only accessible material at the time of research (2022-2023), as many others had been removed due to platform takedowns or state censorship. A more extensive archive of such materials is maintained by the Arman Tatoyan Foundation in Yerevan and can be accessed upon request. The selected videos were analyzed using a qualitative coding framework designed to identify recurring patterns of performative violence, including gestures of domination, symbolic humiliation, and audience-oriented display. Where

possible, the visual material was cross-checked against international human rights reports[4] and other sources to ensure contextual accuracy (Fujii 2010). Given the graphic nature of some footage, detailed descriptions and transcripts are available upon request for ethical review purposes.

Within the analytical framework of this article, the video corpus serves as the primary object of interpretation. The study draws further, as triangulating data, on 45 narrative biographical interviews conducted in 2022 within the framework of the *Mental Mapping of Hadrut* project (see Khachaturova 2025, Shahnazaryan and Khachaturova 2025). All participants were displaced residents of Hadrut who fled to Stepanakert and Yerevan during or immediately after the Azerbaijani offensive in October 2020. The interviews contained accounts of violence, including exhibitionist violence (to be analyzed in a separate research), conducted by the Azerbaijani army that served to better understand and analyse the video sources. Taken together, this mixed methods approach enables the study to examine exhibitionist violence not only as a visual phenomenon, but also as a socially embedded practice through which power, domination, and meaning are communicated in wartime.

I now turn to the analysis section. The next section situates the exhibitionist violence of the 2020 Karabakh War within what I call the "genealogies of humiliation": a set of historically sedimented experiences, narratives, and affective dispositions through which Armenians and Azerbaijanis have interpreted their relative positions, privileges, and losses over a century of shifting imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet orders.

4. Genealogies of humiliation: From Soviet symbolic orders to post-Soviet violent display

Although often described as an egalitarian multinational federation, the Soviet Union institutionalized a deeply layered hierarchy of nationalities. The promise of "friendship of peoples" coexisted with practices of *titular entitlement*, resource allocation along national lines, and rigid administrative borders that often produced new minority situations rather than resolving old ones (Broers 2019). For Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Karabakh became precisely such a site: a place where Soviet administrative logic froze an unresolved competition over territory and status.

This structural inequality — visible in cultural institutions, resource distribution, and competing historical narratives — produced chronic feelings of symbolic injury on both sides. Azerbaijanis understood Armenian demographic and cultural dominance in Karabakh as a violation of their titular entitlement within the Azerbaijan SSR, while Armenians saw the subordination of their autonomous region to Baku as a form of political humiliation and existential insecurity. These mutually mirroring grievances constitute the emotional and cognitive infrastructure through which contemporary

[4] These evidences are amplified by other ones which became parts of various official reports and law cases: The European Court of Human Rights. *Case of Makuchyan and Minasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary*; and the European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR's) judicial cases on serious human rights violations by Azerbaijan against ethnic Armenians: *Badalyan v. Azerbaijan, Petrosyan v. Azerbaijan, Khojoyan and Vardazaryan v. Azerbaijan, Khalapyan v. Azerbaijan, Ghazaryan and Bayramyan v. Azerbaijan, Saribekyan and Balyan v. Azerbaijan.*

actors interpret violence, victory, and defeat. Humiliation became foundational as a political and affective structure within this story.

As Barnhart (2021) has shown, humiliation shapes international behavior when groups perceive their moral worth, status, or rights as degraded by stronger actors. Kösen and Erdoğan's (2022) analysis of Azerbaijani political discourse makes this connection explicit: the 2020 war was framed as the moment when long-standing humiliation was finally reversed. The language of "becoming whole again," of "restoring dignity after 30 years," directly echoes Barnhart's model of status vulnerability, where the perceived recovery of dignity legitimizes extreme forms of violence. Similarly, Hovsepyan and Tonoyan (2025) conceptualize post-2020 Azerbaijani policy as driven by profound *ontological insecurity*: a chronic fear of symbolic loss, instability, and a disrupted sense of social continuity. On this argument, the performances of dominance, including the filming of torture, desecration of corpses, and public humiliation of captives, were affectively charged rituals through which victorious actors sought to expunge the traces of humiliation accumulated over decades. Understanding the 2020 atrocities as exhibitionist, *performative* rather than merely *strategic* requires connecting these genealogies of humiliation to Soviet and late-Soviet forms of public violence. As several scholars have shown (De Waal 2003, 2010, 2023; Shnirelman 2005, 2026; Broers 2019, Arakelyan 2021, Shahnazaryan 2021, Khachaturova 2025, Shahnazaryan and Khachaturova 2025), competitiveness and violent display in the South Caucasus has deep local precedents. The communal violence of 1988–1990 — pogroms in Sumgait, Baku, Kirovabad, and retaliatory expulsions of Azerbaijanis from Armenia — already bore hallmarks of ritualized humiliation: public beatings, forced marches, gendered insults, and the staging of dominance before an audience. As such, this violence, was an early instance of what would later escalate into more public forms of televised cruelty.

In this phase of the Karabakh conflict (1988–1991), ethnic Armenian civilians — especially vulnerable rural workers like shepherds and livestock guards — were murdered and mutilated in ways clearly intended to intimidate entire communities. Their bodies were dismembered and thrown into public spaces. These spectacles of violence were not random; they functioned as symbolic communication, sending a message of terror and ethnic dominance. Once the wider war for Karabakh began, a similar dynamic occurred on the Armenian side at its height in 1992, with violence against Azerbaijani civilians documented by multiple observers (Melkonian 2008, pp. 214–215). While these acts cannot be equated in motivation or scale, they reflected how violence, once normalized and ritualized, became self-replicating: what Taussig (1986) calls the "reproduction of terror." These events predate the technological affordances of digital media but anticipate their logic. They were pre-mediatized performances aimed at enacting and restoring symbolic hierarchy. On this reading, the 2020 spectacle of violence was not a sudden eruption enabled by smartphones and social media but the digital continuation of longstanding cultural scripts. The "grammar" of humiliation — its gestures, its audiences, its affective rewards — was already in place.

Although limited technological resources in the late Soviet period constrained the recording of such atrocities, the patterns were already clear: demonstrative violence was a central strategy, employed both by formal state forces and irregular militias, with the goal of displacing, humiliating, and eliminating the enemy across ethnic divides in the

context of status insecurity among peripheral Soviet citizens. The essentialization of the "enemy other" as an existential threat to national survival enabled this violence to target civilians indiscriminately, regardless of age, gender, or combatant status (Alexeyeva 1987, Melkonian 2008).

The collapse of the Soviet order of things had helped to release these humiliation scripts. Tension-filled ethnic hierarchies were cast into a new political landscape where states sought legitimacy through nationalist narratives and victimhood. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan constructed their foundational myths around suffering and restoration, but in radically asymmetrical ways. For Armenians, the memory of genocide generated a narrative of existential vulnerability. For Azerbaijanis, Soviet-era displacement from parts of Armenia in 1948-1950 and the defeat of the 1991-1994 Karabakh War[5] created a counter-narrative in which Armenians appeared as illegitimate usurpers and humiliators. These narratives mutually reinforced each other and laid the ground for forms of violence oriented toward symbolic reversal as well as military necessity.

5. Exhibitionist violence during the 2020 Karabakh War

The circulation of atrocity videos on social media (TikTok, Telegram, and Instagram) in 2020 was thus not a departure from earlier practices of bodily humiliation (Memorial 1991, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, Panorama 2016, Operation "Ring" 2023, Shahnazarian 2025 pp. 199-202) but an amplification and intensification of already existing practices. The 2020 war lasted 44 days, and was marked by severe human rights violations, including the torture and ill-treatment of Armenian prisoners of war (POWs) and civilians. Interviews and secondary sources indicate that such abuses occurred upon capture (interview with Angel, Stepanakert), during transfer (interview with Manvel, resident of Hadrut), and within detention facilities such as the Azerbaijani Military Police, the Ministry of National Security, and Kurdakhani Prison (Pravo 2016, Human Rights Watch 2020, 2022, Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia 2021a, Arakelyan 2022). Repatriated Armenian POWs have recounted severe beatings inflicted solely due to their Armenian identity. The conflict also witnessed systemic and indiscriminate shelling, as well as direct strikes from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), leading to significant civilian casualties (Interviews with Armineh, Gayane, Sarkis, and Amalia residents of Shushi; PanArmenian.net 2021). At least 81 Armenian civilians were killed by Azerbaijani armed forces, with 42 perishing in missile and UAV strikes. The remaining 39 were reportedly murdered after capture, with instances of beheadings and other forms of torture documented. Notably, following the 2020 war, no Armenians remained in territories that came under Azerbaijani control. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (International Committee of the Red Cross — ICRC — 2020, 2022), only around 20 Armenians remained in Karabakh after the blockade and forced displacement of local Armenians in September 2023.

Instances of mediatized violence emerged within this general picture. A video from October 2020 depicted the residents of Hadrut district, Benik Hakobyan (73) and Yuri

[5] At the time of 1991-1994 Karabakh war ordinary journalists could not document the war as for the lack of technical means, only special photojournalists or military correspondents equipped with photo and video cameras could do it. See the collection of photographs by Armenian-French journalist Max Arshak Sivaslian from the first Karabakh War. Interviewed on May 12, 2022, Yerevan.

Adamyan (25), surrendering to Azerbaijani servicemen. They were later executed with their hands tied behind their backs and wrapped in the flags of Armenia and Karabakh. An Azerbaijani voice commanded, “aim at their heads,” before they were shot multiple times (Waters 2020). These executions were filmed and disseminated rapidly via social media platforms, amplifying their psychological impact. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights referred to this case, highlighting the deeply disturbing nature of the information uncovered. Another video from November 2020 shows the brutal decapitation of Genadi Petrosyan (69), a resident of Madatashen village in Askeran District. His severed head was placed on a dead pig, with an off-camera voice stating, “see the pigs next to each other!” Similarly, in December 2020, a video surfaced showing the beheading of Yuri Asryan (82) from Azokh village in Hadrut District. Despite his pleas invoking “for the sake of your Allah, do not kill me” Azerbaijani servicemen executed him, cheering during the act (Republic of Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman 2021). Armenian prisoners of war (POWs) detained in Baku were subjected to severe mistreatment, as documented in various reports. Notably, older soldiers who had likely participated in previous conflicts over Karabakh faced particularly brutal treatment. Azerbaijani forces frequently inflicted physical abuse, including beatings with fists, feet, and blunt objects, and coerced POWs into chanting anti-Armenian slogans, thereby asserting dominance following their military success (Human Rights Defender 2021a). This pattern of dehumanization extended to acts of public execution designed to intimidate and humiliate.

In Baku, POWs endured regular beatings with various objects, including belts, screwdrivers, gun butts, metal chains, and batons, resulting in lasting injuries (Human Rights Defender 2021a). Captives were often forced to contact their families to falsely assure them of their well-being (Human Rights Defender 2021b). Some were coerced into providing social media passwords, enabling Azerbaijani forces to communicate with their relatives and disseminate images of their torture online (Human Rights Watch 2020). One of the 18-year-old prisoners of war who returned from Baku hanged himself shortly after coming back. When his relatives washed the body in preparation for burial, they discovered that his genitals had been cut off (Interview with victim’s relative, Hayanist). Additionally, POWs were compelled to make scripted video statements under duress, falsely attributing their capture to orders from their commanders. Another prisoner was coerced into reading a prepared statement alleging the presence of Kurdish fighters among Armenian forces. His cellmate, seriously injured prior to capture, was tied to metal bars to keep his body upright and then placed atop a tank to be paraded as a trophy, all while Azerbaijani troops recorded and mocked him.

In one instance, a 20-year-old conscript was forced to wear women’s clothing while being mocked and videotaped by guards, who threatened him with death if he did not comply. This episode exemplifies a form of symbolic emasculation — the performative stripping of masculine status through gendered humiliation — staged and circulated as a visual demonstration of domination. Such cases indicate that gendered degradation is not incidental but deliberately orchestrated for the camera, underscoring the exhibitionist character of this violence. The recording and dissemination of these acts point to a regime of selective visibility, in which certain forms of violence — particularly those that feminize, emasculate, or target women in combat roles — are rendered hyper-visible as part of a broader communicative strategy. Thus, during a military assault on

the Armenian border near Jermuk in 2022, the capture, abuse, and extra-lethal dismemberment of two women snipers — Gayane (a mother of four)[6] and Anush (a mother of three)[7] — were likewise filmed and circulated, transforming violence into spectacle and message. These cases bring to the fore the gendered dimensions of mediatized exhibitionist violence, where the violation of women who transgress normative roles by taking up arms becomes particularly "filmable" and symbolically charged.

By contrast, other instances of extreme violence — such as the killing of an elderly disabled woman and her caregiving daughter in a village near Hadrut, documented through local humanitarian sources — were not recorded or disseminated. This contrast is analytically significant. It suggests that violence against figures associated with vulnerability, dependency, and care does not easily lend itself to a visual script of dominance or triumph. In this sense, the selective mediatization of violence reveals a gendered hierarchy of visibility, in which some bodies are turned into spectacles while others remain unseen.

On this analysis, many acts of exhibitionist violence played on gendered identities. Violence, especially in wartime, often functions as a mechanism through which hegemonic masculinities enact and affirm themselves. Hegemonic masculinity is not simply a personal identity but a social practice rooted in dominance, control, and the symbolic subjugation of, often feminized, others. In the context of ethnic violence, this domination is performed not only over women but over racialized or ethnicized men coded as weaker or lesser within the aggressor's worldview (Messerschmidt 1993, 2018, Connell 1995). As feminist scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (2000) and Laura Sjoberg (2007) argue, the militarized performance of power is rarely gender-neutral; it relies on tropes of male domination, conquest, and female or feminized victimhood. In this way, violence becomes a script through which gender hierarchies — alongside ethnic or national hierarchies — are written and rewritten.

Such visual and symbolic distribution of displays of violence serve as mechanisms for enforcing specific notions of belonging and for categorizing individuals accordingly. As Fujii (2021) observed in the context of Rwanda, violence can be instrumental in redefining societal and political hierarchies. Similarly, in this context, the deliberate exhibition of brutality functioned as a powerful tool for societal reordering, establishing Azerbaijani dominance in a contested status hierarchy. As a result, by early February 2022, Azerbaijani armed forces utilized the visibility of their brutality to intimidate Armenian residents of Karabakh to leave. Using loudspeakers near villages such as

[6] The case was recounted by Lala, Gayane's sister, who now cares for both her sister's children and her own (Jermuk, Armenia).

[7] The identification of the tortured and mutilated female soldier as Anush Apetyan in September 2022—during Azerbaijan's military incursion into the internationally recognized territory of the Republic of Armenia — triggered strong international and transnational reactions. Graphic footage of her abuse circulated widely on Telegram and other platforms, prompting condemnation from human rights organizations, women's groups, and political actors. The case was explicitly referenced in discussions within the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, where calls were made to reassess U.S. policy toward Azerbaijan in light of documented war crimes (https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/assessing-us-policy-in-the-caucasus). The incident became emblematic of gendered, mediatized violence and its role in psychological warfare.

Khramort, Parukh, Nakhijevanik, Nor Shen, and Taghavard, they urged inhabitants to vacate their homes, asserting that they were residing on Azerbaijani territory and must comply with Azerbaijani directives. They coupled these demands with threats of force and killings of ordinary civilians. Additionally, Azerbaijani forces broadcasted Muslim prayers via loudspeakers, symbolizing religious dominance over the predominantly Christian Armenian communities. The blockade of the Lachin corridor, the sole route connecting Karabakh to Armenia, began on December 12, 2022, under the guise of environmental protests by so-called eco-activists. Evidence suggests that these protests were state-orchestrated, as participants displayed the hand gesture of the Grey Wolves, an ultranationalist group notorious for anti-Armenian violence and hate speech. This blockade exacerbated the isolation of Karabakh, hindering access for visitors, including high-ranking Armenian officials and international actors. Due to this situation, by the end of 2023, almost the entire Armenian population had fled the territory of Karabakh.

The fact that the Armenian population fled Karabakh suggests that an instrumental logic of easing the process of ethnic cleansing may have been a contributing factor behind the exhibitionist violence in the Karabakh conflict. Certainly, the coexistence of unofficial, graphic depictions of violence alongside official narratives emphasizing humane treatment of prisoners highlights a stark contradiction that reflects strategies to project a civilized image internationally while simultaneously employing terror to suppress and control adversaries. As noted by Human Rights Watch, the brazenness of soldiers documenting their own violations suggests a belief in impunity, underscoring the necessity for accountability at all levels of command. For decades, Baku's official ideology has not only cultivated a sense of impunity among its citizens but has also actively glorified individuals who commit war crimes. A striking example is the case of Ramil Safarov, the Azerbaijani officer who murdered Armenian officer Gurgen Margaryan with an axe while the latter was asleep during a NATO Partnership for Peace training course in Budapest. Safarov was sentenced to life imprisonment in Hungary but was extradited to Azerbaijan in 2012, where he was immediately pardoned, promoted in rank, and celebrated as a national hero (Shahnazarian 2025, p. 200).

Yet, the recordings of violence against Armenians are more complicated than simply asserting dominance and instilling fear. For example, in many cases the perpetrators also record statements that justify their actions in some way, by for example, referring to the supposed guilt of the person they are torturing. Why do agents of demonstrative violence feel the need to narrate or frame their brutality, particularly when the recording is a deliberate part of the violent act? At first glance, this could suggest a residual moral conscience, a need to justify actions that might otherwise violate internal ethical boundaries (Bandura 1999). However, in the context of exhibitionist violence, where the camera is not a neutral observer, this justification takes on a different function. The recording is not incidental but integral to the spectacle, and the narration acts less as a confession and more as a strategic framing for a targeted audience.

In this way exhibitionist violence includes staging, scripting, and performance intended to send messages to multiple audiences, including political superiors, peer groups, Armenians, and the broader (international) public (Fujii 2009). In these cases, justifications are also for the perpetrators' own in-group, legitimizing violence within specific ideological frameworks. They create a moral narrative that reaffirms ethnic

hierarchies, revenge logics, or victim-blaming, transforming violence from a transgression into a duty. In this way, in moments of extreme violence, the construction of the victim as “already guilty” or “ungrievable” is necessary to make their destruction socially intelligible (Feldman 1994, Butler 2009). Thus, the Azerbaijani soldier’s narrative framing pre-emptively absolves the perpetrator by delegitimizing the victim’s claim to protection, dignity, or humanity.

On this argument, filmed justifications for violence should not be interpreted solely as signs of internal moral dissonance or remorse. Rather, they are part of a broader discursive strategy of state-aligned or nationalist violence, aimed at producing not only terror but truth, a narrative that renders violence both necessary and righteous. Moreover, these justifications serve a performative function for both audiences at home and abroad, broadcasting to both in-group members and external observers that the violent acts are defensible responses to perceived transgressions. This performative aspect not only seeks to normalize the violence within the perpetrators’ community but also aims to intimidate and dehumanize the targeted group, reinforcing asymmetric power dynamics.

In the same vein, the Karabakh case suggests that violent display is not only about asserting dominance through extreme violence in order to establish a clear status hierarchy in a context where status has been contested (Gould 2003). By leaving their identities unconcealed Azerbaijani perpetrators signaled to their in-group their loyalty to that group, whatever the consequences or condemnations, challenging other Azerbaijanis to object to their actions. In line with Gould’s argument about status conflicts, where a group’s solidarity has been in question that group may need to engage in costly signals of group solidarity to maintain its own cohesion as much as to warn off outside aggression. In this regard, the virtual collapse of the Azerbaijani state into warring factions in the 1990s, and the loss in the 1991-1994 Karabakh war, provided the context for exhibitionist violence to take on the logic of signals of solidarity and Azerbaijani group cohesion, carried out on Armenian bodies.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, exhibitionist violence emerged in the 2020 war as a symbolic, rather than purely strategic, practice. It is precisely here that the concepts of violent display (Fujii 2021), blood feud (Gould), and symbolic performance (Collins, Taussig) converge with the genealogies of Soviet and post-Soviet humiliation. The 2020 videos function as texts in Fujii’s sense: orchestrated performances in which perpetrators make no attempt to conceal their identities (1), address the camera directly (2), invoke historical grievances (3), and enact masculinity and triumph before an imagined national audience (4). This makes exhibitionist violence the latest form in a continuum of symbolic practices, not an aberration of wartime brutality. It explains why humiliation matters for understanding Karabakh. To conceptualize this violence simply as strategic or psychological warfare would flatten its complexity. Thus, humiliation, in this context, is functional multifaceted serving simultaneously as a motivating desire to restore degraded status, as a narrative resource that frames victory as redemption (Kösen and Erdoğan 2022), as a cultural script (Broers 2019) that shapes how Armenians and Azerbaijanis imagine themselves and the other, as an embodied practice (Fujii 2009), enacted on the vulnerable body of the enemy and as a political technology (Hovsepyan and Tonoyan 2025), which

produces ontological insecurity that legitimizes further aggression. Seen through this lens, the exhibitionist violence of 2020 is the culmination of unresolved symbolic injuries inherited from Russian and Soviet colonialism and intensified by post-Soviet nationalism.

This paper has argued that the peculiar status insecurities produced by Soviet forms of colonialism — particularly through the nationalities policy — provide the deeper historical backdrop for understanding how extreme exhibitionist violence backed the Azerbaijani military victory in 2020. Azerbaijanis had been subjected to policies by colonial masters that created massive status insecurity, in particular, relative to their direct, and similarly subjugated, neighbours, the Armenians. This insecurity included their apparent untrusted ability for the use of violence, since, at least in the popular imagination it was perceived that Armenians had enjoyed greater privileges in terms of career mobility within the Soviet military. That mobility had given Armenia an edge in the 1991-1994 Karabakh war, leading to a humiliating Azerbaijani loss and near civil war within Azerbaijan itself. In such a context, the potential reputational costs to the perpetrators and distributors of exhibitionist violence, and their endorsers within the state, were outweighed by the benefits of producing that violence. These benefits included the instilling of fear in the facilitation of ethnic cleansing, the expression of clear status dominance, as well as the signaling of full loyalty to the in-group.

As such, we can read some of these exhibitionist violence texts as internal challenges to the perpetrator group. The challenge consists in demanding approval for ever more extreme violent displays, or at the very least remaining silent about any moral squeamishness evoked by them. The greater the sense of disgust that the in-group audience can forego without speaking out, the more they prove their loyalty to the group. Anyone objecting or sympathizing with the victims immediately outs themselves as disloyal. Public cruelty then becomes an unopposable assertion of solidarity with patriotic manhood in an aggrieved, insecure but militarized national culture. At the same time, the erasure or manipulation of these recordings, the official denials, and the simultaneous attempt to project a civilized international image exposes the double performance playing out at the state level where humanitarian language and dehumanizing violence co-exist.

This dynamic is particularly dangerous in authoritarian contexts. While Azerbaijan's state media promotes narratives of humanitarianism and lawful conduct, unofficial Telegram channels and soldier-run pages tell a parallel story of impunity and violent spectacle. Human Rights Watch (2020, 2022) and Amnesty International (2021) have documented this contradiction, showing how state denial coexists with open violence, often filmed by perpetrators themselves, suggesting not moral confusion but moral disengagement. Such disengagement is activated when self-sanctions are cognitively bypassed through mechanisms like moral justification or dehumanization.

To further understand the violence and displacement that occurred in Karabakh, future research should build on feminist peace research, centering everyday experiences, lived trauma, and the gendered dimensions of both violence and survival. As long as violence continues to be used as a tool of identity-making, message-sending, and boundary-drawing, and as long as exhibitionist performance remains a medium through which

political hierarchies are contested and consolidated, we must refuse the illusion of neutrality: when violence speaks, one must listen, decode, and intervene.

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Appendix. Field work

Author's Fieldwork Materials (in-depth interviews in the framework of the academic project "Future of Karabakh", USC, Los Angeles, USA).

International Committee of the Red Cross (information provided by local unit in Stepanakert).