

JULFA

The Annihilation of the
Armenian Cemetery
by Nakhijevan's
Azerbaijani Authorities





Northern view of the central part of the cemetery with the river Arax in the background. Photo Aram Vruyr, 1915



NAKHJEVAN A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

by Dr. Armen Hagnazarian

Nakhjevan is situated in the area between the mountain range of Zangezur and the river Arax. It borders on the Republic of Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1931 Turkey exchanged some territory with Iran and acquired a common frontier with Nakhjevan.

Nakhjevan was located within the borders of Urartian (Ayraratian) Armenia (9th to 7th centuries B.C.), as well as the Armenian kingdoms of the Orontids (6th to 2nd centuries B.C.), the Artashesians (189 B.C. to the early 1st century A.D.) and the Arshakids (66 to 428). In ancient times and in the Middle Ages, Nakhjevan included the following districts of Metz Hayk (Armenia Maior): Sharur District, Ayrarat Province; Yernjak and Jahuk Districts of Syunik Province; as well as Nakhjevan and Goghtan Districts of Vaspurakan Province. Goghtan was the district where Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, first introduced the Armenian letters.

Due to its geographical position and location on a transit trade route, Nakhjevan was repeatedly invaded and devastated by the Arabs, Seljuk-Turks, Tatar-Mongols, Ak-Koyunlus (White Sheep Turkomans), Kara Koyunlus (Black Sheep Turkomans), as well as the Persians and Turks.

The treaty of Turkmenchay, signed between Russia and Persia after the Russo-Persian war of 1826 to 1828, shifted Northeastern Armenia, including Nakhjevan, into Russian domination. Nakhjevan was included in the Armenian

Province (*Armianskaya Oblast*) until 1840. It was then part of Yerevan District between 1840 and 1846, and of Yerevan Province from 1849 till May 1918.

During the period between World War I and 1921, Nakhjevan was situated within the borders of the first Republic of Armenia.

Between 1919 and 1920, Turkey, under the auspices of its allies, perpetrated the slaughter of thousands of Nakhjevan Armenians. That carnage was actually the continuation of the Great Armenian Genocide, that had been committed in Turkey since 1915 for the purpose of removing the obstacle the Armenians posed to Turkey's unification with the Turkic tribes inhabiting what is present-day Azerbaijan. A long-pursued dream of Pan-Turkism, which is still a top priority for that country...

In compliance with an illegal agreement Soviet Russia and Turkey signed after World War I, on 16 March 1921 without the participation of the Armenian side, Nakhjevan was placed under the "auspices" of Azerbaijan as an autonomous territory; in fact, it was annexed to that country after having formed an inseparable part of Armenia over many centuries.

Throughout the 70 years of Soviet rule, the Azerbaijani authorities consistently implemented a policy of national discrimination against the indigenous Armenian populations of Nakhjevan and Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), another Armenian territory annexed to Azerbaijan in 1923 by Stalin, as part of his policy of dividing nations to facilitate control and domination.

On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenians of Nagorno Karabakh started a peaceful movement for self-determination. Azer-



Partial views of the cemetery. Photos Rafayel Abgarian, 1986

baijan attempted to suppress it, by mobilizing all its military and civilian forces. Alternately organizing and allowing pogroms against the Armenians living in the Azerbaijani cities of Baku, Sumgait and Gandzak, the Azerbaijani authorities intended to intimidate the Armenians into abandoning Karabakh and Nakhijevan. During the years of armed conflict between Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan, Northern Karabakh (Northern Artsakh) and Nakhijevan were totally stripped of their indigenous Armenian populations. The last remaining 2,000 Armenians were deported from Nakhijevan in 1989. As a result, Nakhijevan's centuries-old Armenian cultural heritage was reduced to a state of captivity, and its planned annihilation loomed large.



A khachkar, 1551. Photo Zaven Sargissian, 1987

The State of the Armenian Monuments in Nakhijevan

The centuries-old cultural monuments the Armenian people created both in Nakhijevan and other territories of Historical Armenia are of universal value. At various periods, they were studied by different foreign scholars.

In recent years, Nakhijevan's Azerbaijani authorities have been perpetrating the premeditated annihilation of a wide variety of Armenian monuments which are reminders of the Armenian presence in the region. In August 2005, European researcher Stephen Sim became witness to the barbarities committed against the Armenian monuments in Nakhijevan.



A khachkar, 1575. Photo Rafayel Abgarian, 1986



Partial views of the cemetery. Photo Zaven Sargissian, 1987

The Armenian Cemetery of Julfa, Nakhijevan

The violence against the memory and history of the Armenian people reached its climax with the total destruction of the historical cemetery of Julfa (known as 'Jugha' in Armenian) located in Yernjak District.

Julfa Cemetery used to extend over three hills on the left bank of the river Arax. Boasting a special place in the treasury of world heritage, this extensive depository of spiritual and artistic monuments aroused the admiration of both Armenian and foreign travellers and art historians for many centuries. French traveller Alexandre de Rhodes, who visited the cemetery in 1648, saw 10,000 standing khachkars and ram-shaped tombstones there. By 1904, however, their number had been reduced to 5,000.

The khachkars of Julfa Cemetery fall into three groups. The first group dates from the period between the 9th and 13th centuries; the second group from the 14th to 15th centuries, and the third covers the time span between the early 16th century and the year 1605.

All the khachkars were carved of pink and yellowish stone. Having equal width from top to bottom, they were between two and two and a half metres high. Their central parts were more deeply-engraved, the crosses and double-layer reliefs creating a peculiar contrast of light and shade. The khachkars were adorned with fine rosettes, as well as reliefs of plants, geometrical figures and scenes of daily life. Their upper parts often bore the representations of Christ, the Evangelists and the Holy Virgin. Most of the khachkars and grave-stones of the cemetery had embossed or engraved Armenian epitaphs.



A khachkar, 1571. Photo Zaven Sargissian, 1987



Khachkars broken to pieces to be used as building material. Photo Zaven Sargissian, 1987

The Final Destruction of the Armenian Cemetery of Julfa

In the Soviet years, Julfa Cemetery was absolutely neglected by Azerbaijan's Monuments Preservation Department; moreover, under state auspices, its khachkars were continually broken to pieces and used as building material.

In November 1998, Nakhijevan's Azerbaijani authorities started destroying the cemetery with

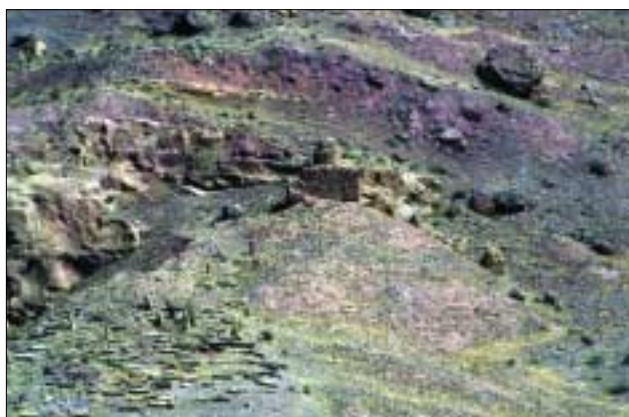
bulldozers. UNESCO's intercession was able to stop that unprecedented vandalism only temporarily.

The annihilation of the cemetery resumed on 9 November 2002. The photographs some eye-witnesses took from the Iranian bank of the river Arax revealed that none of the cemetery's khachkars remained standing.

Between 10 and 14 December 2005, the Azeri vandals, who had not been held accountable for their previous crimes, finally succeeded in purging



The cemetery during its destruction with bulldozers. Photo Arpiar Petrossian, 1998



Pombloz Church before its explosion and afterwards. Photos Armen Haghnazarian (1976) and Hrayr Baze-Khacherian (2002)



The site of the cemetery with its khachkars toppled over. Photo Hrayr Baze-Khacherian, 2002



The Azeri soldiers breaking the khachkars to pieces with heavy hammers. Photo Arthur Gevorgian, 10 to 14 December 2005



The Azeri soldiers breaking the khachkars to pieces with heavy hammers. Photo Arthur Gevorgian, 10 to 14 December 2005



The crushed pieces of khachkars emptied into the Arax-facing side of the railway. Photo Arthur Gevorgian, 10 to 14 December 2005

the three hills of Julfa Cemetery of all the remnants of khachkars. Using heavy hammers and pickaxes, about 200 soldiers of the Azerbaijani army reduced the displaced khachkars to a heap of crushed pieces which were loaded onto lorries and emptied into the river Arax.

In early March 2006, Nakhijevan's authorities stationed a shooting-ground on the site of Julfa Cemetery. Lying over thousands of human

remains, that firing-ground is an eloquent manifestation of Azerbaijan's moral values. Situated very close to the Iranian border, it can never serve soldiers in need of shooting practice. In fact, it was hurriedly established to conceal Azerbaijan's criminal actions: the Azerbaijani authorities turned the site of the former cemetery into a "military zone" so that they could ban foreign missions and observers from entering it.



An Azerbaijani military base and a shooting-ground stationed in the site of the annihilated cemetery. Photo Arthur Gevorgian, March 2006

The Political Consequences of the Taliban-like Actions of the Azerbaijani Authorities

A country can gain entry to UNESCO and ICOMOS only if it complies with the laws and principles established in their statutes. Is a member country not to be expelled from these organizations if it later infringes its commitments?

Violating the 1948 UN Convention on Cultural Heritage, Nakhijevan's Azerbaijani authorities demolished thousands of Armenian monuments (churches, monasteries, cemeteries, etc.) in peaceful times, with the complicity of their army.

Following the example of the Taliban who destroyed the statues of Buddha in Bamian, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan is obliterating Nakhijevan's centuries-old historical monuments, thus hoping to prove that the region was never an Armenian territory...

The destruction of Nakhijevan's Armenian cultural heritage at state level is a crime not only against the Armenian nation but against all civilization. The annihilation of such monuments as the cemetery of Julfa is defilement of sacred tenets of all religions. Does a country having committed such vile desecration have any right to remain a member of the Council of Europe?





“Requiem” for Armenian cultural monuments

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