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Dale Berning Sawa
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Monumental loss: Azerbaijan and 'the worst cultural genocide of the 21st century'



Lost to time ... some of Djulfa's thousands of khachkars, circa 16th century, photographed in the 1970s before their destruction. Photograph: © Argam Ayvazyan archives, 1970-81

A damning new report details an attempted erasure by Azerbaijan of its Armenian cultural heritage, including the destruction of tens of thousands of Unesco-protected ancient stone carvings

The 21st century's most extensive campaign of cultural cleansing to date may not have happened in Syria, as you might assume, but a largely ignored part of the Transcaucasian plateau.

According to a lengthy report published in the art journal *Hyperallergic* in February, the Azerbaijani government has, over the past 30 years, been engaging in a systematic erasure of the country's historic Armenian heritage. This official, albeit covert, destruction of cultural and religious artefacts exceeds Islamic State's self-promotional dynamiting of Palmyra, according to the report's authors, Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman.

Maghakyan, a Denver-based analyst, activist and lecturer in political science, labels it "the greatest cultural genocide of the 21st century". He grew up with stories about his father visiting a beautiful, mysterious place called Djulfa. Located in the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan, on the banks of the Araxes river, it was the site of a medieval necropolis, the largest ancient Armenian cemetery in the world. Visitors through the centuries, from Alexandre de Rhodes to William Ouseley, had noted the remote location's splendour.

At its height, the graveyard counted around 10,000 khachkars, or cross stones, standing to attention, the earliest dating back to the 6th century. Unique to Armenian burial traditions, these distinctive tall steles of pinkish red and yellow stone feature crosses, figurative scenes and symbols, and highly decorative relief patterning. By the time the Soviets formalised the autonomous regions of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan in 1920, after decades of plunder, less than 3,000 khachkars remained. Subsequent episodic vandalism led Unesco in 2000 to order that the monuments be preserved.



The New Tears of Araxes, a short film by Simon Maghakyan and Sarah Pickman showing the destruction of Djulfa. Watch it on YouTube here.

But that had little effect. On 15 December 2005, the prelate of northern Iran's Armenian church, Bishop Nshan Topouzian, filmed - from across the river in Iran - the Azerbaijani military methodically laying waste with sledgehammers to all that remained of Djulfa. The soldiers loaded the debris on to truck beds and dumped it into the Araxes.



The footage can be found in a 2006 film entitled *The New Tears of Araxes* posted on YouTube, edited by Maghakyan and scripted by Pickman. It is chilling. Satellite research shows that, in 2003, the uneven, textured landscape was dotted with multiple small structures. By 2009, it is flattened and empty.

The Azerbaijani government has repeatedly refused international inspectors entry to the site, it has not responded to requests for comment - including for this article - and it has denied Armenians ever lived in Nakhichevan. Such stonewalling renders independent verification difficult, but the sheer amount of forensic evidence that Maghakyan and Pickman present makes a rock-solid case for at least not being deterred. Their contention is that the dramatic events at Djulfa marked the final stage of a broader campaign to denude Nakhichevan of its indigenous Armenian Christian past.

Underlining quite how little international attention has been paid to this story, most of the material on which this report is based was gathered not by official bodies but by individuals, who, like Maghakyan and Pickman, have operated on their own dime.



Armenian art researcher Argam Ayvazyan in 1981, next to a 14th-century khachkar in Niors, near his birthplace. Photograph: © Argam Ayvazyan archives, 1970-81

Local researcher Argam Ayvazyan, now exiled in Armenia, photographed 89 Armenian churches, 5,840 khachkars, and 22,000 tombstones between 1964 and 1987 - which the report states have all disappeared. A Scotsman named Steven Sim travelled on a whim to eastern Turkey in 1984 and has taken in excess of 80,000 slides and photographs over the past 35 years documenting ancient Armenian heritage across the region: "It was the nearest faraway place to Britain, at the time, that was cheap to go to," he says. He's been regularly returning ever since, amassing a 1,000-tome library - with many books by Ayvazyan - mostly on Armenian architecture.

Azerbaijan's erstwhile national treasure Akram Aylisli, meanwhile, has lived under virtual house arrest since 2013, when he published writing critical of his government's actions. He first protested what he termed "evil vandalism" in a 1997 telegram to the country's president. "Such senseless action," he wrote, "will be perceived by the world community as a manifestation of disrespect for religious and moral values."

Sim points out that the *Hyperallergic* report fails to adequately explain the artistic value of what has been lost. Armenian architecture is unique, he says - deceptively minimal in appearance but highly sophisticated structurally and built to withstand the landscape's seismic volatility. He describes the diminutive churches as more sculpture than building; single-volume domed structures that look like they've been cast in stone. The khachkars, meanwhile, are regional, the meaning of the iconography and symbolism they display largely lost to time. That loss is most keenly felt with the destruction of the Djulfa cross stones, which featured scenes of daily medieval life - people riding horses, carrying water jugs, or picnicking in gardens, the food laid out on carpets - and strange mythical creatures including a four-legged hooved beast with two bodies, a single head and wings. "I've looked at thousands of khachkars throughout Armenia," Sim says, "and I've only ever seen one which has this twin-bodied single-headed animal. But they all had them in Djulfa."

The world rightfully recognised Isis's wrecking of Palmyra as a war crime, an immense loss for the Syrian people and humanity as a whole. Maghakyan hopes Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike will see what has happened in Nakhichevan as a crime against all, committed by a ruthless regime. The Azerbaijani historian who acted as peer reviewer for the article, but wished to remain anonymous due to fears for their safety, told Maghakyan that the report was "for all of us, regardless of ethnicity and religion", but especially for Azerbaijanis who had not lost or surrendered their conscience.

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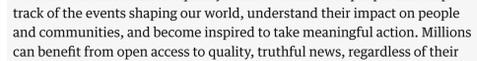
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