

Sacred Stones Silenced in Azerbaijan

Simon Maghakyan describes the destruction of a vital part of the heritage and early history of Armenians.

WHEN, IN THE SUMMER OF 2005, Scottish researcher Steven Sim visited the region of Nakhichevan, an exclave of the South Caucasus republic of Azerbaijan, in order to study medieval Armenian monuments, he found out his trip was in vain – there was nothing there for him to research. After being detained and questioned by security police, Sim was asked why he expected Armenian Christian churches in a region where only Muslims lived. A villager, too, told him Armenians had never lived in Nakhichevan. When the researcher explained that a book had directed him to the ancient Armenian church in the village, an old man blasted out words in what Sim thought was German. The translator explained that the man was talking to him in Armenian, apparently to see if Sim was an Armenian spy. Knowing Armenian in a place where no Armenians ever lived seemed too awkward.



One of the *khachkars* – photographed before the destruction – decorated with Christian symbols, Armenian inscriptions, plants and scenes of daily life, some dating from the early Middle Ages.

But Sim did not confront Azeris in Nakhichevan about history. Neither did he resist orders to put his camera away in a military zone at the Azerbaijani-Iranian border when his train was passing by world's largest surviving Armenian medieval cemetery – Djulfa (Jughha in Armenian). Sim might have done otherwise if he knew back then he was going to be the last known outsider in this remote area – on the border

with Iran – to glance at the thousands of sacred and beautifully handcrafted *khachkars* (literally, cross-stones) – up to eight feet tall burial monuments with intricately carved surfaces – before they were going to be reduced to dust in less than half a year.

More than 350 years ago, a foreign traveller to Djulfa estimated 10,000 *khachkars* in the cemetery. By 1998, less than eight decades after a Soviet agreement with Turkey placed Nakhichevan under Azerbaijan, there were only 2,000 remaining. Still, the surviving stones were stunning and irreplaceable, and a screaming statement to the aged presence of the Armenian people in Nakhichevan who were forced to leave their ancestral homes as Azerbaijan took over. *Archaeology Magazine* writes, 'The oldest burials in the Djulfa cemetery ... date to the sixth century AD, but most of the famed *khachkars* are from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.' According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites, the Azeri authorities destroyed much of the cemetery in



Uniformed Azerbaijanis captured on film in the act of destroying the Djulfa gravestones in December 2005.

1998 and in 2002 followed by limited international protest. But as late as August 2005, as Sim witnessed, Djulfa was not entirely wiped out. He says that 'most of the stones were still there and had only been toppled'.

On December 15th, 2005, Russia's Regnum News Agency was the first international outlet to quote reports of approximately '100 Azerbaijani servicemen ... crush[ing] Armenian graves and crosses' An Armenian film crew in northern Iran, where the cemetery was visible from, had videotaped dozens of men in uniforms in the Azerbaijani border hacking the *khachkars* down with sledgehammers, using a crane to remove some of the largest monuments from the ground, breaking the stones into small pieces, and dumping them into the River Araxes by a large truck. The destruction, which also amounted to desecration of Armenian remains beneath the stones, had reportedly started on December 14th and lasted for a few days giving the world media enough time to report it as it was happening. But it was not until April 2006 when Azeri journalists from the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting confirmed that the cemetery had vanished. *The Times* reflected on April 21st, '[a]



medieval cemetery regarded as one of the wonders of the Caucasus has been erased from the Earth in an act of cultural vandalism likened to the Taliban blowing up the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001.'

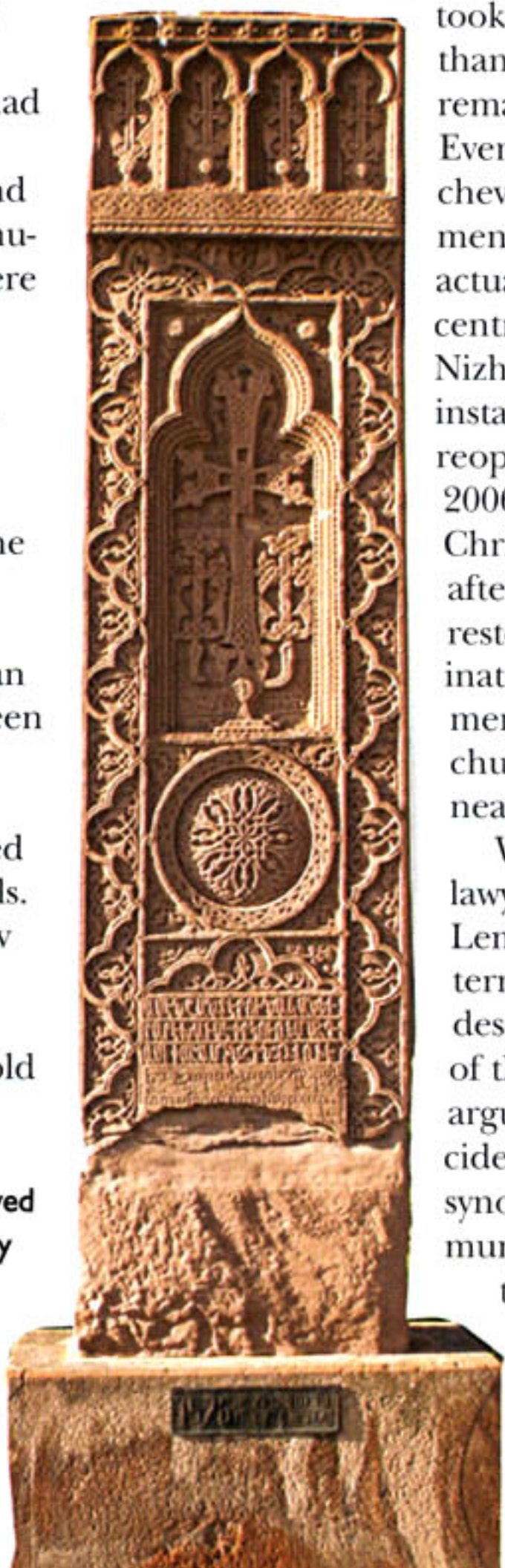
While the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhas had received worldwide coverage at the eve of the war on terror, the destruction of Djulfa was barely noticed. The only Associated Press article quoted Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev as denying the demolition report as 'an absolute lie, slanderous information, a provocation' and accusing Armenia of destroying Azeri monuments. The US administration's response to the vandalism came only after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her assistants were asked about America's reaction. While in her reply to a US legislator Rice urged Azerbaijan to 'take appropriate measures to prevent any desecration of cultural monuments,' her assistant Matthew Bryza said at a news conference it was 'not really up to the United States to take steps to stop it' because it was 'happening in

a foreign country'. Thomas de Waal, an expert on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations says, 'Foreign investors and diplomats in Azerbaijan are very sensitive towards anything that touches on the Armenian-Azerbaijani issue and the peace process and are therefore very timid about raising the issue of the destruction of cultural monuments.'

Although, today, Armenia's victory in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh in the early 1990s is understood generally to be the reason for Djulfa's destruction, the concern for Azerbaijan's Armenian heritage has its roots in the beginning of the unresolved conflict itself. One reason for Karabakh's breakaway from Azerbaijan, writes security analyst Emmanuel Karagiannis, was the fear 'that the Armenian character of Karabakh would disappear as it had in Nakhichevan over the decades.

The Armenian population in Nakhichevan had all but disappeared and Armenian monuments there were systematically removed and reportedly destroyed by the Azerbaijani authorities.' The assertion that Nakhichevan's native Armenian heritage has been completely cleansed is indirectly affirmed by Azeri officials. Hasan Zeynalov from Nakhichevan, for instance, has told the BBC,

A *khachkar* removed from the cemetery during Soviet times and preserved at Etchmiadzin cathedral, founded 4th century AD.



'Armenians have never lived in Nakhichevan, which has been Azerbaijani land from time immemorial, and that's why there are no Armenian cemeteries and monuments and have never been any.'

Azerbaijan's denial of Djulfa's destruction followed by refusal to allow international observers to visit the cemetery site questions the effectiveness of a number of international laws. While a February 16th, 2006, European Parliament resolution condemning Djulfa's demolition provided a list of international conventions violated by Azerbaijan, the vandalism was not mentioned in the US State Department's 2006 International Religious Freedom Report on Azerbaijan released on September 15th, 2006. Identical to the wording of at least five-year-old reports, the State Department proclaimed that 'all Armenian churches, many of which were damaged in ethnic riots that

took place more than a decade ago, remained closed.' Even outside Nakhichevan the statement did not reflect actuality. A church in central Azerbaijan's Nizh village, for instance, was reopened in early 2006 for the Udi Christian minority after a publicized restoration eliminated the Armenian letters on church walls and nearby tombstones.

When Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide' to describe the crime of the crimes, he argued that 'genocide' was not a synonym for 'mass murder' because the latter did 'not convey the specific losses to civilization in the form of cultural con-

tributions'. But culture was excluded from the UN genocide convention's adopted version. And despite the growing academic use of the term 'cultural genocide', the crime is still not formalized in international law. When sacred material heritage is deliberately destroyed to prove that the destroyed culture never existed or to make sure that it doesn't exist (and especially when the act is committed by a party in trust), the crime is not simply a violation of the monument, but a genocidal act against the collective identity that the monument represents.

Call it 'cultural genocide' or 'vandalism,' the destruction of Djulfa demands rethinking of cultural rights. Such a process could start with the US State Department condemning the Djulfa destruction in its next Inter-

national Religious Freedom Report on Azerbaijan and concluding for a need to readdress cultural genocide. The screamers to Djulfa's lost treasure are the handful of surviving sacred stones that are scattered around the world similar to the forgotten Armenian exiles of Nakhichevan. These few *khachkars* were transferred from the cemetery before the 1990s and are found today in the yard of Armenia's St Etchmiadzin Holy See, at the Hermitage Museum of St Petersburg and other places. Once medieval Armenia's largest cemetery and rich with thousands of *khachkars* only years ago, the sacred graveyard of Djulfa has been erased and replaced, as March 2006 and later photographs testify, with a military rifle range.

Simon Maghakyan

Found ... in France

Kevin Desmond looks for records of a little-known French inventor who rivalled Thomas Edison.

HE SINGLE-HANDEDLY INVENTED the electric vehicle, electric boat with portable engine, electric airship, portable electric safety lamp, endoscope, electric rifle, electric 'light sabres', electric jewellery, luminous fountains – among 40 patents. Only a few of his precision instruments, hand-built at his workshop in central Paris, have survived. Each one is marked: 'Trouvé, 14 rue Vivienne, Paris – *Eurêka*'.

And you would be forgiven for thinking that Trouvé is merely the past participle of the verb *trouver*, meaning 'found' (*eurêka* in Greek). But Gustave Pierre Trouvé, albeit an extremely modest, confirmed bachelor, was a real person.

Gustave Trouvé (1839-1902).



Born in La Haye-Descartes (Indre et Loire) in 1839, Gustave, his brothers and his sister were dominated by their father Jacques, a wealthy cattle merchant.

Encouraged by his mother Clarisse, aged only seven the boy built a working miniature steam engine out of a sardine tin and umbrella spokes.

By the early 1860s the