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ETHNOCIDE IN ARTSAKH: THE MECHANISMS OF AZERBAIJAN'S USURPATION OF INDIGENOUS ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE⁸

HAMLET L. PETROSYAN

Yerevan State University, Armenia

ԱՄՓՈՓԱԳԻՐ

Մշակութային էթնոցիդն Արցախում. Ադրբեջանի կողմից հայ մշակութային ժառանգության բռնայտության մեխանիզմները:

Արցախի հայ մշակութային ժառանգության բռնայտացումն Ադրբեջանի իշխանությունների հայահալած քաղաքականության բաղկացուցիչ մասն է: Այն ընթանում է արտաքնապես խճողված, բայց ներքուստ ճկուն մեխանիզմների միջոցով: Հողվածում առանձնացվում և քննարկվում են հետևյալ մեխանիզմները.

ա) բռնայտացում ինտերնացիոնալիզմի և ժողովուրդների իրավահավասարության քարոզի ներքո, բ) արցախահայ մշակութային ժառանգության վերագրում աղվաններին, իսկ աղվաններից էլ ադրբեջանցիներին, գ) վերանվանում, վերօգտագործում, ձևափոխում, դ) ֆիզիկական ոչնչացում:

Key words - *Ethnocide, Armenian cultural heritage, Artsakh, atheistic propaganda, renaming, reuse, Albanization, physical destruction*

Բանալի բառեր - *էթնոցիդ, հայ մշակութային ժառանգություն, Արցախ, աթեիստական քարոզ, վերանվանում, վերօգտագործում, աղվանականացում, ֆիզիկական ոչնչացում*

It appears that scholars no longer doubt that the Azerbaijani identity was constructed during Soviet years. It was created on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, legalized through the Soviet policy of defining ethno-national identity, and legitimized through the myths of antiquity at the expense of distorting and destroying the histories and cultures of ancient Media, Atropatene, Caucasian Albania (Aluank), and Armenia's historical northeastern regions of Utik, Artsakh, and Nakhichevan.

⁸ This text was translated from Armenian into English by Simon Maghakyan and copy edited by Sarah Pickman. The author expresses his gratitude to them.

Since the people of the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan included not only the newly-named Azeri ethnoses, this created expansionist opportunities and ambitions (including over the Armenian regions of Syunik and Gegharkunik), if not a self-righteous license, to assimilate ethnic and religious minorities, including the majority of Kurds, Udis, Lezgis, and Tats. It is impossible to even imagine better circumstances for such designs.

It is widely-documented, if not outright apparent, that this policy's ultimate political goal was to present Azeris as indigenous and heir to the ancient peoples who had lived in what Azerbaijani nationalists refer to as 'Northern Azerbaijan' (which is the constituent state of Soviet Azerbaijan) and 'Southern Azerbaijan' (northern Iran), namely: the Caucasian Albanians, Medians, and Atropatenians.

Medians have long vanished along with advocates for their 'historical rights', Atropatenians were outside the Soviet border with no opportunity to effectively protest the process of history revisionism, and the true heirs to the territory's history and culture, of the Caucasian Albanians, were few in number, divided along linguistic and religious lines, and legally and politically weak, if not impotent.

Subsequent developments demonstrated that the Armenians, who were historically, religiously and culturally close to the Caucasian Albanians, did not fight for the cultural rights of their near-vanished neighbors, even when Caucasian Albanian identity had been arguably a part of Armenian history and culture.

The biggest hurdle to Azerbaijan's policy of constructing a historical memory and ancestral homeland were the large number of Armenians and their cultural monuments, which were dispersed across the territory of Azerbaijan, with a significant concentration in Artsakh, Utik, and Nakhichevan.

This paper attempts to clarify and classify Azerbaijan's political and scientific mechanisms employed at the systematic expense of Armenian history and culture. Specifically, it will seek to highlight those factors that enabled, interfered with, or prevented this revision and usurpation.

In general, cultural heritage is best preserved and enjoyed when it is perceived as a socially, economically, and politically critical component of the present and the future. Under such use, cultural heritage functions not merely aesthetically or symbolically, but coalesces into ethno-national identity, which makes the misattribution of this highly-integrated heritage by another collectivity difficult at best.

As a result of sovietization, which included forced annexation to Azerbaijan and government-sanctioned atheism, the indigenous Armenian population of Artsakh loosened its grip on its cultural identity (save for the more secular practices of a distinct dialect, ceremonial rituals, traditions, and imaginations). In other words, heritage was no longer functioning as an agent of identity-preservation.

Under those circumstances, Azerbaijan's aggressiveness toward Armenian heritage was met with no serious resistance. The forced misattribution was, at first, conducted through the **official process of propagating atheism, where propaganda and deliberate destruction went hand-to-hand**. The nomadic Muslim population, who were the base for the developing Azerbaijani identity, suffered few cultural losses as opposed to the indigenous

and agriculturalist Christian populace, whose material heritage could be physically reduced to match the limited number of Islamic monuments.

While the societal side of official atheism amounted to denying a deity and suppressing superstitions, the scientific application of godlessness often targeted folk culture so that the latter would not contain religiosity.

The most visual and dangerous outcome was the downgrading of immobile heritage to something unworthy of protection, translating official atheism to an active campaign against the existence of cultural monuments.

First and foremost, this policy entailed the destruction, deformation, and re-adaptation of Armenian architectural structures, inscriptions, khachkars and tombstones (ill. 1-3) by Azerbaijani authorities. As a result, churches in hundreds of Artsakh villages were usually converted to storage areas or, in the best case scenario, ‘cultural centers.’ For instance, the monastery in Charektar, at least since the 1960s, was functioning as a house and barn for an Azerbaijani family (ill. 4,5).

Nevertheless, the demolition of hundreds of churches and khachkars, sometimes for use as construction material, was an extreme material, but most importantly moral, blow to Armenian heritage. It must be noted that we, Armenians, also participated in this destructive campaign in the name of atheism.

On one hand, destroying and mistreating cultural monuments reduces their value to simple decorations and takes sacredness out of them. On the other hand, this campaign eliminates the irreplaceable scientific and documentary value that all historical monuments possess.

As noted, one of the methods used to institute atheism was ***to target ‘folk’ culture and scientifically ‘recover’ its traditional roots: redefining cultural identity without official religion.***

The classic example of such policy is the ethnographic book by Dr. Petrushevskiy, with a self-evident Russian title: “О дохристианских верованиях крестьян Нагорного Карабаха” (“About the pre-Christian beliefs of the villagers of Nagorno-Karabakh”).

Notably, “Armenians” have been replaced with “villagers,” perhaps suggesting that non-indigenous Muslims also had pre-Christian roots in the region.

Anti-Christian atheism is what primarily compels Petrushevskiy to secularize sacred Christian heritage. For instance, he claims that “folk wedding traditions have survived. In particular, before leaving for her new house, the ritual of the bride’s worship of her paternal house’s ground oven – *tonir* – which, villagers say, is more sacred and important than the church itself. For the Armenian villager, the wedding ritual is essentially the worshipping of the oven [the source of survival] than a Christian rite”.⁹ In truth, ‘oven-worshipping’ was usually

⁹ Петрушевский И. О дохристианских верованиях крестьян Нагорного Карабаха (About the pre-Christian beliefs of the villagers of Nagorno-Karabakh, in Russian) – Reports of State Research Institute of History, vol. 1, issue 5, Baku, 1930, p. 4. The state-perpetuated thesis of ‘cultural commonality’ between Armenians and Azeris being stronger than among other ethnic groups in Soviet Azerbaijan has been recently analysed in Сафарян В. А. Освещение древней и средневековой культуры Арцаха в Азербайджанской исторической науке (Safaryan V. A. Interpretation of ancient and medieval culture of Artsakh in Azerbaijani historical science, Russian. PhD Thesis in History), Yerevan, 2009, p. 17.

practiced in villages without churches, and the worship of sacred oven in Artsakh, as we have argued in a separate publication, contained an administrative-political context.¹⁰ Let's also note the factual errors of the Russian researcher. Petrushevskiy, for instance, considers *ojakh* and *tonir*, creating the combined term of *ojakh-tonir*, as one and the same, when, in the case of Artsakh, *ojakh* was the oven inside the house while *tonir* was the outdoors cooker. The scholar's statement implies that he hasn't categorized holy *ojakhs* among sacred sites, even though he has encountered them. Such negligence doesn't seem bothersome to the author, however, as long as his scholarship could downplay and downgrade the inconvenient role of Christianity.

In addition to the secularization of Christian traditions, ***another mechanism that neutralized Armenian identity was the discovery of overlapping histories.*** Since Christian Armenian and Azeri Muslim cultural differences were apparent, a mechanism of cultural usurpation – under the guise of internationalism and the brotherhood of nations – was the construction of cultural 'kinship,' 'common roots,' and 'similarities.' For example, Petrushevsky attempts to prove, at every cost, that for Karabakh Armenians, the Christian holy sites and rituals were considered less valuable than pre-Christian folk traditions. Stretching this convenient argument even further, the scholar also argued that, as far as pre-Christian/folk traditions are concerned, Armenians and Tatars [Azeris] have almost the same cultural pillars. To demonstrate this, Petrushevsky argues that the legends and worship of Christian sacred sites (at their core) are the same for both Armenians and Azeris: "It must be noted that Turkish [Azeri] and Armenian villager beliefs show more similarity and closeness to each other than with the beliefs of the elite Muslims and Christians."¹¹

Not surprisingly, the same mechanism was utilized by Azeri scholar Zia Buniatov, but for the purpose of arguing for common ancestry. According to Buniatov, the rituals and customs of Armenians from various regions (Artsakh, Syunik, Gardman, Kutkashen, Ismail, etc.) were surprisingly similar to the customs of their Azeri neighbors; which supposedly demonstrates that modern Armenians and Azerbaijanis descend from Caucasian Albanians, some of whom have joined the Armenian Church and assimilated, while others have become Muslim.¹²

This same mechanism was utilized to equate Armenian architectural culture to late medieval Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan by noting random similarities. As we can see, the next step isn't that far: if the cultures are so interrelated, then we can assume that the creators of these cultures were the same.

The next mechanism, which has an administrative angle, is what may be called ***a state monopoly over studying cultural heritage.*** This meant that the history and culture of territory of Soviet Azerbaijan, including Artsakh, could only be studied by Azerbaijani academic institutions. Such studies were under the strict review of the Communist Party apparatus. Local Armenian scholars were persecuted and even deported for attempting to study their own history and culture. I recall, for instance, a 1977 research trip to Artsakh villages for the purpose of documenting khachkars; in some villages, school principals would

¹⁰ Պետրոսյան Հ., Քարաբլուրի նորագյուտ սրբարանը և «սուրբ օջախների» պաշտամունքն Արցախում (Petrosyan H. The newly discovered sanctuary in Karablur and worship of a sacred fireplaces in the Artsakh-Kharabag region, in Armenian) - Armenian Saints and Sanctuaries, Yerevan, 2001, p. 347-356.

¹¹ Petrushevsky, Op. site, p. 2.

¹² Буниятов З. М. Азербайджан в VII-IX вв. (Buniatov Z.M. Azerbaijan in VII-IX cc, in Russian), Baku, 1965, p. 100.

refuse to support my research, arguing that I would need to have a written permit issued by the local Communist authorities in order to be able to photograph khachkars. My PhD chair and academic advisor, academician Babken Arakelyan, once commented that all of his initiatives to establish cooperation with the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences had been fruitless. In his eyes, the only success was the 1960s agreement that allowed Armenian researchers to document medieval Armenian inscriptions in Artsakh-Karabakh under the leadership of S. Barkhudarian, while also allowing Azerbaijanis to document Arabic-script inscriptions in Armenia under the leadership of M. Neymatova. Interestingly, both Barkhudaryan's and Neymatova's books were published somewhat later, in the early 1980s.¹³ While the first research had only documented Armenian inscriptions, Neymatova's findings also included inscriptions of tombs of Islamized Armenians, including descendants of the famed Orbelyan clan, presenting the latter as Azerbaijani.

These Moscow-backed policies hindered the training of Armenian specialists in the field. For instance, Armenian studies departments were unable to train specialists in the Caucasian Albanian alphabet, yielding the field entirely to neighboring Georgia. The recent discovery of Caucasian Albanian manuscripts in the Saint Catherine monastery of Sinai, Egypt, has revolutionized the history of this culture, since, for the first time, it became possible to read several partial texts. Nonetheless, after reviewing publications on the topic, - specifically those authored by renowned linguist academician Zaza Aleksidze, from the National Academy of Georgia - it becomes obvious that author tends to highlight the Georgian influence in the creation of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet and on Albanian literature.¹⁴

Let us acknowledge the role of 'Albanophobia' in Armenian academic circles. An entire generation of scholars was attempting to separate Caucasian Albanian culture from Armenian culture; as if, from the beginning, agreeing to the Azerbaijani thesis that 'Caucasian Albanians' were to some extent 'Azeri.' To concede this academic point, however, meant accepting the political undertones of the proposed thesis; indeed, this is one of the victories of Azerbaijani historiography's usurpation. Armenian studies were compelled, on one hand, to counter the direct connection of Azerbaijanis and Caucasian Albanians, and, on the other hand, to separate Caucasian Albanian culture from Armenian heritage. It is a pity that Armenian efforts to distance ourselves from any Caucasian Albanian characters had its contributions to Armenians cultural losses.

The next Azerbaijani step was ***to construct terminology that supported revisionism – usurpation through relabeling***. Azerbaijanis were ridiculously proclaiming Azerbaijan's entire Armenian heritage – famous people, nobilities, the entire people, the entire material heritage, as Caucasian Albanian-Azerbaijani; and now Armenian scholars are passionately trying to counter these baseless misattributions.

This process surely even confused Armenian scholars, since another usurpation mechanism was soon developed. The classical founder of this practice was again Buniatov. Instead of

¹³ Դիվան հայ վիճագրության, պր. 5. Արցախ (Archives of Armenian epigraphy, vol 5, Artsakh, by Barkhudaryan S. G., in Armenian), Yerevan, 1982. 1982. Нейматова М. С. Мемориальные памятники Азербайджана: XII-XIX века (Neimatova M. S. Memorial monuments of Azerbaijan: XII-XIX centuries, in Russian), Baku, 1981.

¹⁴ The Albanian Script. The Process - How Its Secrets Were Revealed by Zaza Aleksidze and Betty Blair - http://azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/ai113_folder/113_articles/113_zaza_aleksidze_secrets.html.

It is noteworthy that further investigations led to the conclusion that the new Albanian originals appear closest parallels at first with old Armenian and then with Georgian, see: The Caucasian Albanian Palimpsests of Mt. Sinai, vol. 1, Turnhout, 2008, pp. XXIV, I-34.

discourse, documentation, and demonstration of evidence, all that was needed was relabeling of the existing record. Armenian historical sources have been proclaimed Caucasian Albanian, Armenian historians – Albanian historians, and even Armenian-lettered names have been written in Russian and Azerbaijani adaptations. Ironically, even the most outspoken representatives of the ‘Caucasian Albanian thesis’ did not know Armenian; this despite the fact that many of the ‘Albanian’ documents were written in the Armenian script. It makes one laugh to read Azerbaijani scholars Buniatov’s or Mamedova’s citations of early medieval Armenian historian Movses Kaghankatvatsi’s work. The Azerbaijani scholars present the original Armenian text in semi-educated, Cyrillic-font, classical Armenian, in a failed attempt to demonstrate the mastery of the primary sources. Yet the most amusing antics come from two other Azerbaijani scholars, D. Akhundov and N. Rzayev. In one photo-documentation of Christian monuments in Soviet Azerbaijan, Akhundov lists every item as being of Caucasian Albanian-Azerbaijani heritage. In doing so, he fabricates Azerbaijani nomenclature for Armenian khachkars, renaming them “Nishandash,” “khachdash,” etc.¹⁵ Rzayev, on the other hand, goes even further, calling Caucasian Albanians Turks and arguing that they are as Turkish as Azerbaijanis are. He keeps reiterating this bizarre theory in almost every page of his book, as if fearing that the reader is going to forget this new invention. Moreover, demonstrating a complete lack of understanding regarding the area’s historical timeline, he repeatedly mentions that this or that monument - through ‘the decorative motif’ - belongs to the Caucasian Albanian era. The same zeal is seen in the contradictory classification of Caucasian Albanian and Oghuz-Turkish in the 18th-19th century tombstones of Avetaranots, Armenian village in Artsakh, which demonstrates a lack of knowledge regarding the monuments’ dates and deliberately ignores the monuments’ expansive inscriptions in the Armenian language.¹⁶ For instance, the following epitaph was inscribed on the 1736 tombstone of Melik Shahnazar, son of Melik Hise (ill. 6, 7):

«Այս է տապան մէլիք Շահնազարի
 Որդի Մելիք Յիսսէին. թվ :ՌՃՁԵ: (1736):
 Ոգեմ գբանս գովեսդի
 Ի վերայ Մելիք Հուսէյնի,
 Զոր գրեցի այս տապանի:
 Սա էր տէր երկրին Վարանդայի
 :ԼԵ: (35) մասն գեղի.
 Սայ էր հացով, սեղանով լի,
 Ողորմէր ամեն ազգի.
 Կերպարանօքն էր գովելի,

¹⁵ Ахундов Д. Архитектура древнего и раннесредневекового Азербайджана (Akhundov D. Architecture of ancient and early medieval Azerbaijan, in Russian), Baku, 1986, pp. 236-252.

¹⁶ Рзаев Н. И. Искусство Кавказской Албании: IV в. до н.э. - VII в. н.э. (Rzaev N. I. Art of Caucasian Albania: IVc. BC – VIIc. AD, in Russian), Baku, 1976.

Թագ պարճանք Հայոց ազգի,
 Յոյժ կողորեաց ազգէն դաջլի,
 Պատերազմեաց յետ օսմանցի,
 Սա ոչ ետ հարկ թագաւորի,
 Ամուր պարիսպ էր աշխարհի:
 Որ է եաշն թվին :ՌՃԾԸ: (1709)»: ¹⁷
 (“This is the gravestone of Melik Shahnazar’s
 Son, Melik Hisein in year 1736.
 I am weaving words of praise
 About Melik Husein
 And ascribing [them] into this tomb.
 He was Varanda land’s lord,
 With thirty five villages.
 His table was always full [with food],
 And [he] had mercy on everyone.
 [He] had commendable character
 And was the crown and pride of the Armenian nation.
 He killed many Tajiks [i.e Turks],
 And fought against the Ottomans [i.e. Turks]
 Paid no tax to kings.
 Was the strong [castle] wall of our world,
 And was born in year 1709”).

Would the historical Oghuz-Turks – the actual forefathers of today’s Azerbaijanis – forgive their Azeri descendant, Rzayev, for classifying someone as Oghuz whose tombstone venerates him as the pride of the Armenian nation, killer of Turks?

In the past two decades, parallel to the Karabakh liberation movement, Artsakh Armenians have rediscovered their connection to their cultural heritage; in other words, this heritage is reemerging as an inseparable part of their identity. The first signs of this rebirth became apparent in the beginning of the Artsakh movement. The All Saviour Ghazanchetsots

¹⁷ Archives of Armenian epigraphy, vol 5, Artsakh, p. 149.

church of Shushi (ill. 8), for instance, inspired many to seek liberation and then came to represent that freedom. In the besieged Karabakh capital, Stepanakert, which is not far from Shushi, locals would ask each other when they would be able to light candles, referencing the liberation of Shushi from Azerbaijani forces. During the movement, legends spread (as far as Los Angeles) about another sacred site – the monastery of Gandzasar (ill. 9) – and its minister Father Hovhannes. Even today, people visit the monastery to see the missile that hit the monastery but didn't explode. A few years ago, factual and not-so-factual information emerged about finding remains of Saint Dadi at his namesake monastery (ill. 10); and today many stories have spread about the recent discovery of Tigranakert, a 2,000-year-old Hellenistic city built by Armenian emperor Tigranes the Great, in Karabakh (ill. 11-13). These are just a few examples of hundreds of similar stories. The organic rejuvenation of cultural stories and rites is a testament to the natural function of cultural heritage – the process of fostering cultural identity. Perhaps ethnographers and specialists of Armenian studies should pay more attention to the mechanisms of reclaiming culture in order to understand and cultivate the process. Under the conditions of such a renaissance, the above-mentioned mechanisms of cultural heritage usurpation should backfire on the fabricators themselves. This is expressed in Azerbaijan's new obsession for antique roots, as well as the country's systematic and systemic hostility toward the cultural heritage of indigenous Armenians. **The physical destruction** of the historical record through the targeting of cultural monuments – such as the complete destruction of the medieval Jugha (Djulfa) cemetery in 2005 – has reached its zenith (ill. 14).

The Azerbaijani approach to Armenian cultural heritage and their heirs is an unwavering and unremorseful example of their animosity and obsession for obliteration.

This sad reality is an outright demonstration that the Azerbaijani identity has been comprehensively constructed by means of deliberately misattributing the rich heritage of their indigenous neighbors. In this light, expecting Azerbaijan's authorities and official academia to show flexibility towards, let alone respect and care for, the Armenian people and culture of Artsakh-Karabakh – the living opponents of the foundational myths of Azeri identity – is, at best, shortsighted.

This provision finds its full proof in our days, when Azerbaijan, with the support of Turkey and with its direct participation, unleashed a large-scale war against the Artsakh Republic. The shelling of civilian buildings is accompanied by the ruthless destruction of cultural heritage. This is witnessed by the shelling of the Holy Savior Ghazanchetsots Church in Shushi, the destruction of the museums of Hadrut and Martakert, the desecration of the Talish Memorial, the destruction of the Tigranakert archeological camp. Every day new facts of the destruction of the Armenian cultural heritage of Artsakh are registered. And this is happening in the 21st century under the indifference of international humanitarian and cultural organizations.



Fragmented cross-stones (khachkars) (12th -13th centuries)
inserted in the wall of the Azerbaijani school, Tsar.



A cross-stone (khachkar) fragmented by the Azerbaijani people (12th-13th centuries), Handaberd monastery.



The monastery of Charektari (10th-14th centuries) transformed into a barn, Karvachar.



The gravestone of Hise, 1736, Avetaranots.



The Church of Holy Saviour Ghazanchetsots in Shushi before the destruction by Azerbaijani side.



The Gandzasar monastery (12th-17th centuries).



Dadivank (12th-17th centuries).



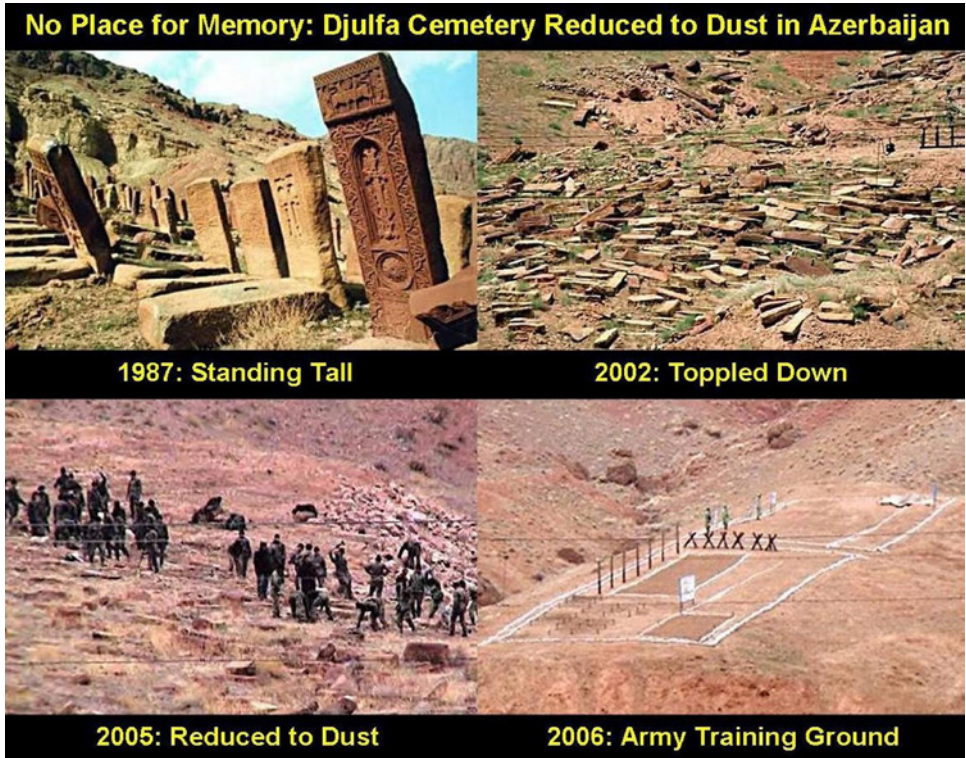
Tigranakert, the general view of the central part of the city.



Tigranakert, the towers of the fortified district (beginning of the 1st century BC).



Tigranakert, the early Christian square (5th-6th centuries).



Poster, showing the annihilation of Julfa's cemetery,
<https://blog.amnestyusa.org/djulfa-cemetery-destruction-timeline/>.



The Church of Holy Saviour Ghazanchetsots in Shushi after the Azerbaijani missile attack (the photograph: <https://m.armeniasputnik.am/photo/20201025/25060044/arajnagcic-uxix-ekexeci-adrbejani-sanzazercac-apterazmin-i-patasxan-harsaniq-enq-anum.html>).



Field Camp of the Tigranakert archaeological expedition after the Azerbaijani missile attack.