

AZERBAIJAN

Destruction of the Armenian Cemetery at Djulfa

For a long time there have been complaints about the destruction of Armenian monuments and sites in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, three of the neighbouring countries of Armenia. A particularly sad example is the destruction of the Armenian cemetery in the former town of Djulfa, situated in the south of Nachitchevan, a region under the sovereignty of Azerbaijan. This cemetery, which had been in use from the early Middle Ages to the destruction of the town in 1605, was an outstanding testimony of Armenian culture because of thousands of tombstones mostly from the 15th and 16th centuries in the shape of so-called Khatchkars. The destruction process, which began in 1998 when 800 Khatchkars were removed, was temporarily halted following protests from UNESCO, but in November 2002 it was taken up again. When ICOMOS was informed and given photos of this barbaric act in a remote frontier area by RAA (Research on Armenian Architecture) in January 2003 and by ICOMOS Armenia in February 2003, the destruction, which cannot have been carried through without the consent of the Azerbaijan government, was already completed: "On January 10th Mr Hagnazarian [author of the following report] was called by the very distressed Armenian Bishop of Tabriz (Iran) who informed him that he went to the Iranian side of the river Araxes opposite the cemetery of Djulfa some days ago to see with his own eyes what had seemed incredible to him: The

1500-year-old cemetery had completely been flattened meanwhile."

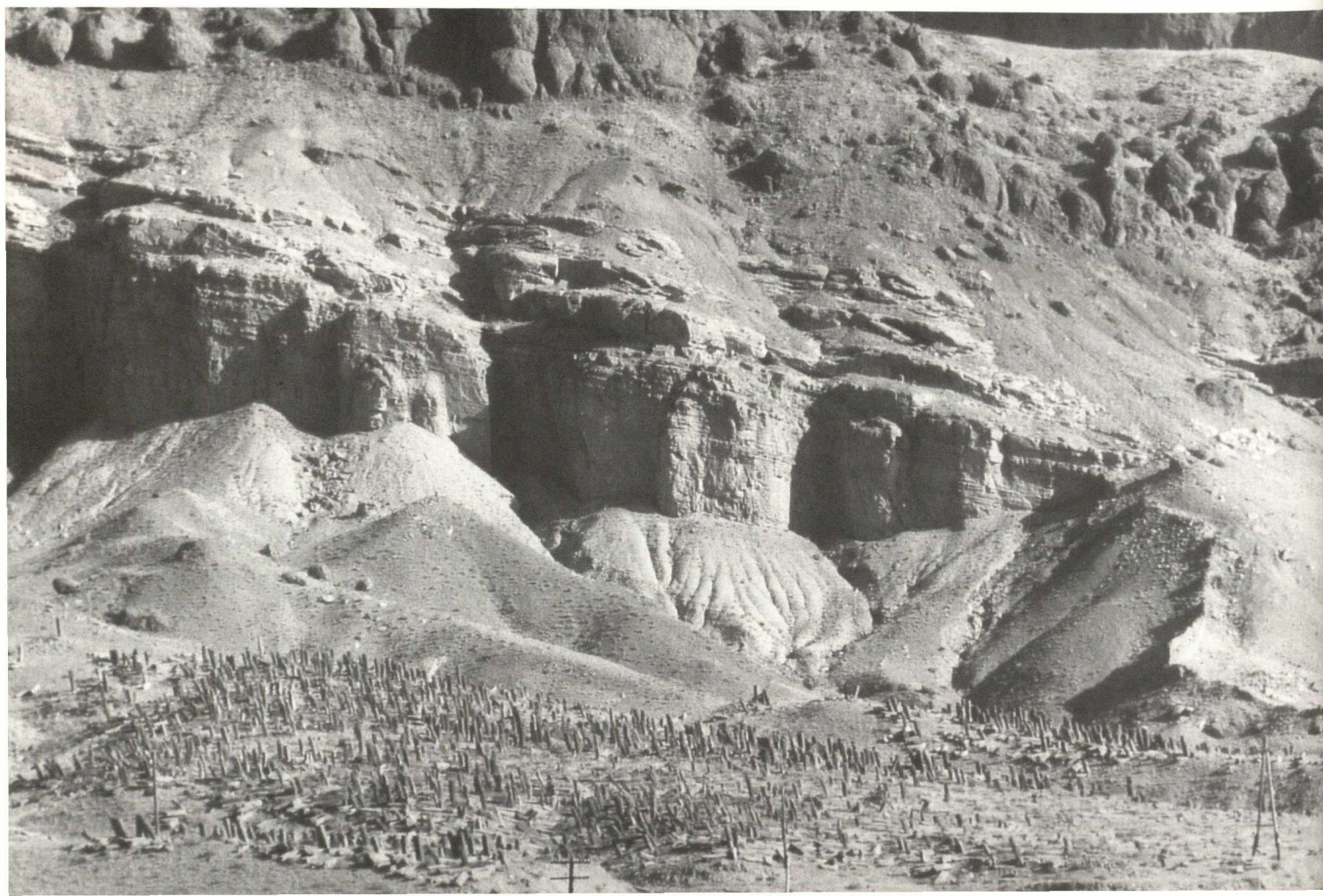
There only remains the hope that under the guidance of UNESCO it will be possible to investigate the situation on the spot and to take care of the remains of the tombstones, transported away by Azerbaijan railways probably to be used as material for building measures. Hopefully, strong protest will at least prevent the demolition of more Armenian heritage sites in Azerbaijan in the future. The intentional destruction of the cemetery of Djulfa should be considered as a crime against the common heritage of humanity. Apart from that all that remains is deep sorrow for the irreplaceable loss.

Here is the report of RAA:

Khatchkars are cross-stones about one metre wide and up to 2.50 metres high, richly decorated with Christian symbols, flowers and arabesque climbing plants as well as with subjects from daily life. These delicately engraved stones represent a 1500-year-old tradition of Armenian stone masons. Khatchkars are unique and were used as free-standing steles but also as ornaments in the masonry of Armenian churches and cloisters. Since the early Middle Ages they have been used as tombstones on cemeteries.

One of the outstanding cemeteries because of the unusually

The roughly 1500 years-old cemetery of Djulfa before the destruction of its c. 5000 cross stones



great number of Khatchkars is the one in the former town of Djulfa (old name Djughha) in the south of Nachitchevan right on the bank of the river Araxes which forms the border to Iran. Alexander Rotes mentions this cemetery in his description of journeys in 1648 and reports of 10.000 fully decorated cross stones. In 1605 the Armenian people of Djulfa were forced by Shah Abbas to settle in Persia in order to have trade and commerce developed by them in his country. He destroyed the town to prevent their return, however left the cemetery untouched. At the beginning of the 20th century 6000 reclining and standing Khatchkars were still counted.

After Armenia was incorporated into the Soviet Union Nachitchevan in the south of Armenia was declared a part of Azerbaijan at Stalin's and Lenin's behest in 1922. Nachitchevan is still under Azerbaijan's political sovereignty.

During the Soviet reign this historically and culturally unique cemetery of Djulfa was not at all under the protection of historical monuments of Azerbaijan. On the contrary. After 1922 a large number of Khatchkars disappeared. Considering the close watch of the border of the prohibited military zone this could not have happened without the government's knowledge. And more destruction was yet to come.

In November 1998 eye witnesses from the Iranian border zone observed tombstones being excavated by a crane and loaded onto railroad wagons on the cemetery grounds across the river Araxes. The ripped-up ground was then made even again by bulldozers. This destruction lasted for three weeks and about 800 Khatchkars were taken away. There is reason to believe that these cross-stones

– if not destroyed right away – were used as building material for foundations of new houses to hide their removal. The transportation by the State Railway is clear evidence of the planned action by the Government of Azerbaijan. Protests on behalf of UNESCO and affiliated organisations finally put a stop to these barbarous activities.

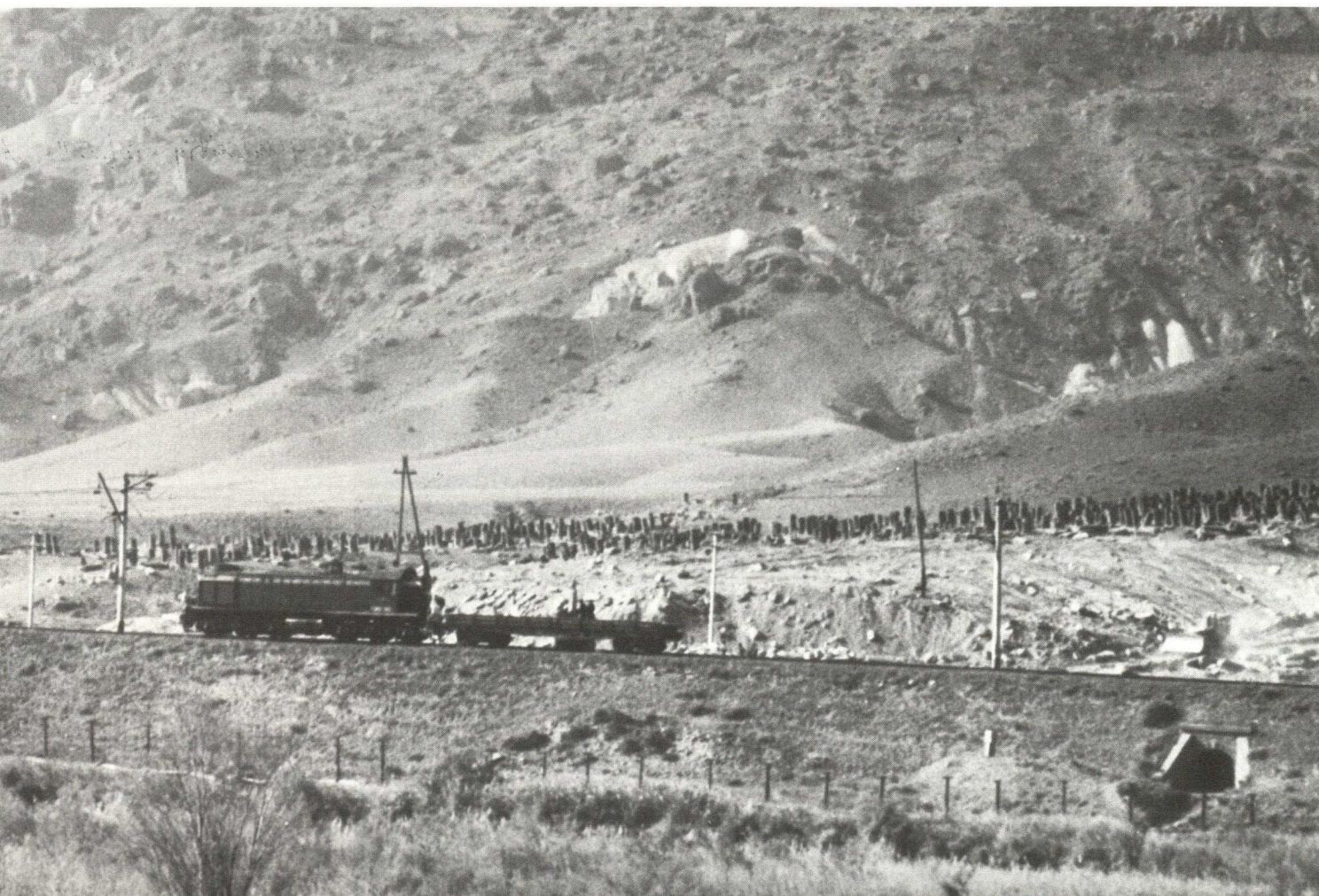
To our great regret the cultural outrage is going on. Reliable sources informed us that the destruction not only of the tombstones but also of the still existing, though greatly reduced churches and cloister grounds in the area was resumed on 9 November 2002. A great number of workmen are again dismantling valuable relics of Middle Age Christian culture partly by demolishing them and partly by taking them away on trucks to an unknown destination. And yet again this cannot be done without the permission of the government.

One cannot avoid drawing a parallel to the fundamentally motivated destruction of the Buddha statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan, which was accompanied by world-wide protest. Similar to that case we are here confronted with the systematic obliteration of religious monuments of a foreign culture, the only difference being that the destruction in Nachitchevan concerns the European history of civilisation.

Azerbaijan signed the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1993 and is represented in the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan consequently committed itself to the aims of this institution and should be asked to account for its action in Nachitchevan.

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In 1998 about 800 Katchkars were removed, a process temporarily halted following protests from UNESCO





Cross stones from the 15th/16th centuries on the mediaeval cemetery of Djulfa before their destruction





Cross stone smashed for removal

